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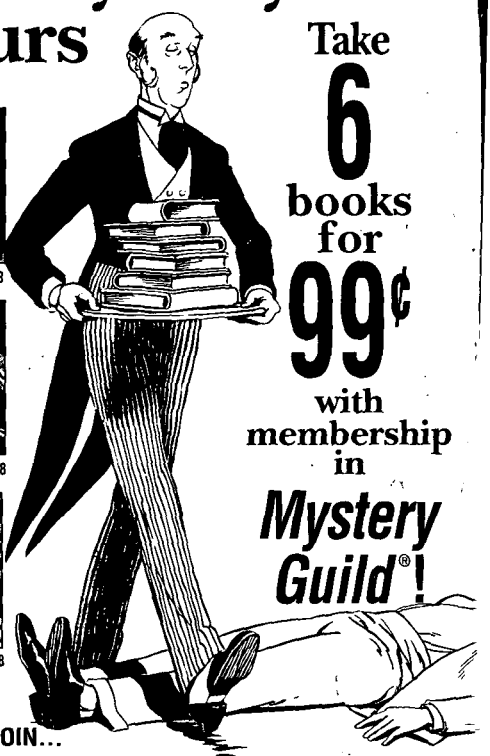

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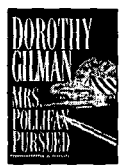

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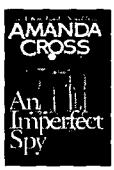

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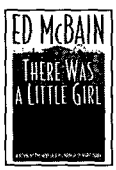

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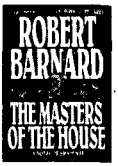

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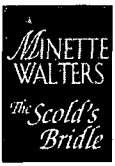

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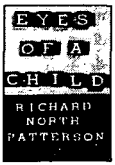

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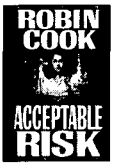

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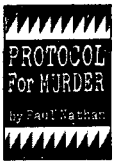

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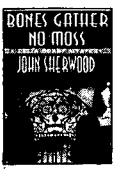

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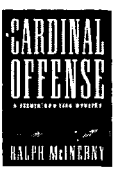

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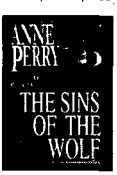

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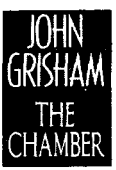

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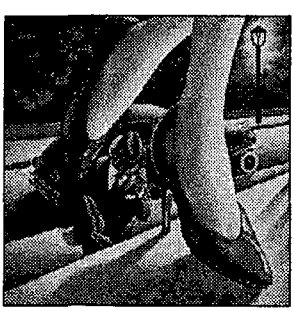

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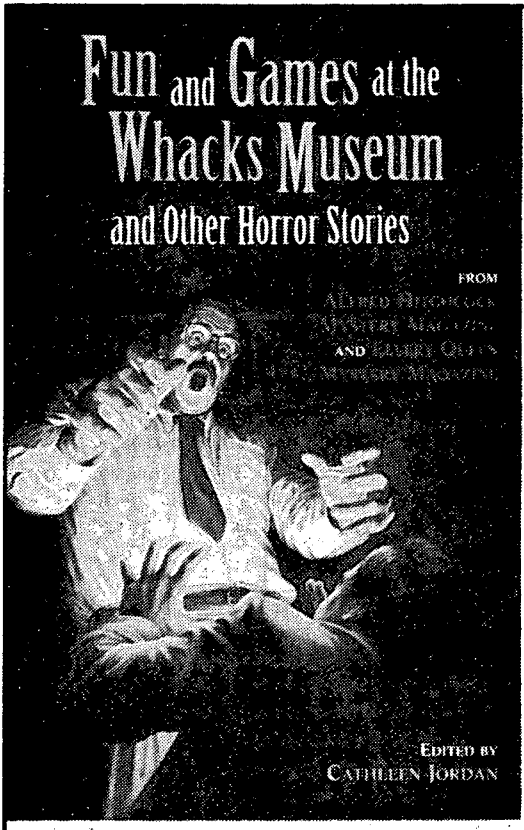

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FIRST PLACE—MWA CONTEST

EQMM *is honored this month to present the winners in the professional writers category from the Mystery Writers of America's fiftieth anniversary short story contest. Three hundred entrants from forty-eight states and four countries turned in a remarkably varied selection of work, presenting the judges—your editor, author Edward D. Hoch, and The Mysterious Press's senior editor, Sara Ann Freed—with some difficult choices. That there were a number of strong stories to choose from, many of them from writers whose names we had not heard before, made the contest an exciting event for all concerned. When the final lists were made, the name at the top was an author every* EQMM *reader will know, one of the U.K.'s first-ranked crime writers, Peter Lovesey. Mr. Lovesey earned a worldwide reputation in the crime field with his series of Victorian mystery novels featuring Sergeant Cribb, and he has expanded upon it with further historical and contemporary books. Despite his success with longer works, he has never lost interest in the mystery short story, and as the following story demonstrates, he is one of its cleverest practitioners. . . .*

THE PUSHOVER

by PETER LOVESEY

During the singing of the Twenty-third Psalm, the man next to me gave me a nudge and said, "What do you think of the wooden overcoat?"

Uncertain what he meant, I lifted an eyebrow.

"The coffin," he said.

I swayed to my left for a view along the aisle. I could see nothing worth interrupting the service for. Danny Fox's coffin stood on tres-

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tles in front of the altar looking no different from others I had seen. On the top was the wreath from his widow, Merle, in the shape of a large heart of red roses with Danny's name picked out in white. Not to my taste, but I wasn't so churlish as to mention this to anyone else.

"No handles," my informant explained.

So what? I thought. Who needs handles? Coffins are hardly ever carried by the handles. I gave a nod and continued singing.

"That isn't oak," the man persisted. "That's a veneer. Underneath, it's chipboard."

I pretended not to have heard, and joined in the singing of the third verse—the one beginning "Perverse and foolish oft I strayed"—with such commitment that I drew shocked glances from the people in front.

"She's going to bury Danny in the cheapest box she could buy."

This baboon was ruining the service. I sat for the sermon in a twisted position, presenting most of my back to him.

But the damage had been done. My response to what was said was blighted. If John Wesley in his prime had been giving the Address, I would still have found concentration difficult. Actually it was spoken by a callow curate with a nervous grin who revealed a lamentable ignorance about the Danny I had known. "A decent man" was a questionable epithet in Danny's case; "a loyal husband" extremely doubtful; "generous to a fault" a gross misrepresentation. I couldn't remember a time when the departed one had bought a round of drinks. If the curate felt obliged to say something positive, he might reasonably have told us that the man in the coffin had been funny and a charmer capable of selling sand to a sheik. I cared a lot about Danny, or I wouldn't be here, but just because he was dead we didn't have to award him a halo.

My contacts with the old rogue went back thirty years. Danny and I first met back in the sixties, the days of National Service, in the air force, at a desolate camp on Salisbury Plain called Netheravon, and even so early in his career, still in his teens, Danny had got life running the way he wanted. He'd formed a poker school with a scale of duties as the stakes and, so far as I know, served his two years without ever polishing a floor, raking out a stove, or doing a guard duty. No one ever caught him cheating, but his silky handling of the cards should have taught anyone not to play with him. He seduced (an old-fashioned word that gives a flavour of the time) the only WRAF officer on the roll and had the use of her pale

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blue Morris Minor on Saturdays to support his favourite football team, Bristol Rovers. Weekend passes were no problem. You had to smile at Danny.

I came across him again twelve years later, in 1973, on the sea front at Brighton dressed in a striped blazer, white flannels, and a straw hat and doing a soft-shoe dance to an old Fred Astaire number on an ancient windup Gramophone with a huge brass horn. I had no idea Danny was such a beautiful mover. So many people had stopped to watch that you couldn't get past without walking on the shingle. It was a deeply serious performance that refused to be serious at all. At a tempo so slow that any awkwardness would have been obvious, he shuffled and glided and turned about, tossing in casual gull turns and toe taps, dipping, swaying, and twisting with the beat, his arms windmilling one second, seesawing the next, and never suggesting strain. After he'd passed the hat around, we went for a drink and talked about old times and former comrades. I paid, of course. After that we promised to stay in touch. We met a few times. I went to his second wedding in 1988—a big affair, because Merle had a sister and five brothers, all with families. They were a crazy bunch. The reception, on a river steamer, was a riot. I've never laughed so much.

Danny was fifty-seven when he died.

We sang another hymn and the curate said a prayer and led us out for the committal. The pallbearers hoisted the coffin and brought it along the aisle. I didn't need the nudge I got from my companion as they passed. I could see for myself that the wood was a cheap veneer. I wasn't judgmental. Quite possibly Danny had left Merle with nothing except his antique Gramophone and some debts.

"She had him insured for a hundred and fifty K," Mean-mouth insisted on telling me as we followed the coffin along a path between the graves. "She could have given him a decent send-off."

I told him curtly that I wasn't interested. God knows, I was trying not to be. At the graveside, I stepped away from him and took a position opposite. Let him bend someone else's ear with his malice.

Young sheep were bleating in the field beside the churchyard as the coffin was lowered. The clouds parted and we felt warmth on our skins. I remembered Danny dancing on the front that summer evening at Brighton. *Bon voyage,* old buccaneer, I thought. You robbed all of us of something, sometime, but we came in numbers to see you off. You left us glittering memories, and that wasn't a bad exchange.

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A few tears were shed around that grave.

As the Grace was spoken I became conscious of those joyless eyes sizing me up for another approach, so I gave him one back, raised my chin to the required level, and stared like one of those stone figures on Easter Island. My twenty years of teaching fifteen-year-olds haven't been totally wasted. Then I turned away, said "Amen," and smiled benignly at the curate.

Mean-mouth walked directly through the lych gate, got into his car, and drove off. Why do people like that bother to come to funerals?

Most of us converged on the Red Lion across the street. A pub lunch. A corrective to nostalgia. It fitted my picture of Danny that his mourners should be forced to dip into their pockets to buy their own drinks. The only food on offer was microwaved meat pies with soggy crusts. Mean-mouth must have known. He would have told me that Merle was the skinflint, and on sober reflection it is difficult to believe otherwise. It seemed Danny had ended up with a tightwad wife. A nice irony.

And the family weren't partying at the house. They joined us, Merle leading them in while "Happy Days Are Here Again" came over the music system. Her choice of clothes left no one in any doubt that she was the principal lady in the party—a black cashmere coat and a matching hat with a vast brim like a manta that flapped as she moved. She was a good ten years younger than Danny, a tall, triumphantly slim, talkative woman who chain-smoked. I'd heard that she knew a lot about antiques; at their wedding, Danny had got in first with the obvious joke about his antiquity, and frankly the way Merle had eyed him all through the reception, you'd have thought he was a piece of Wedgwood. Yet we all knew he was out of the reject basket. Slightly chipped. Well, extensively, to be truthful. He'd lived the kind of free-ranging life he'd wanted, busking, bartending, running a stall at a fairground, a bit of chauffeuring, leading guided walks around the East End, and for a time acting as a croupier. Enjoyable, undemanding jobs on the fringe of the entertainment industry, but never likely to earn much of a bank balance. With his innocent-looking eyes and deep-etched laughter lines, he had a well-known attraction for women that must have played a part in the romance, but Merle didn't look the sort to go starry-eyed into marriage.

Someone bought her a cocktail in a tall glass and she began the rounds of the funeral party, cigarette in one hand, drink in the

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other, giving and receiving kisses. The mood of forced bonhomie that gets people through funerals was well established. I overheard one formidably fat woman telling Merle, "Never mind, love, you're not bad-looking. Keep your 'air nice and you'll be all right. Won't 'appen at once, mind. I 'ad to wait four years. But you'll be all right."

Merle's hat quivered.

She moved towards me and I gave her the obligatory kiss and muttered sympathetic words. She said, "Good of you to come. We never really got to know each other, did we? You and Danny go back a long way."

"To his air force days," I said.

"Oh, he used to tell wonderful tales of the RAF," she said, calling it the "raff" and clasping my hand so firmly that I could feel every one of her rings. "I don't know if half of them are true. The night exercises."

"Night exercises at Netheravon?" said I, not remembering any.

She took hold of my hand and squeezed it. "Come on, you know Danny. That was his name for that pilot officer whose car he used."

"Oh, her."

"Night exercises. Wicked man." She chuckled. "I couldn't be jealous when he put it like that. To Danny, she was just an easy lay. I envy you, knowing him when he was young. He must have been a right tearaway. Anyway, sweetie, I'd better not gossip. So many old mates to see." She moved on, leaving me in a cloud of cigarette smoke.

Another woman holding a gin and tonic sidled close and said, "What's she on, do you think? She's frisky for a widow."

"I've no idea."

"Danny's brother Ben must have given her some pills."

"Which one is Ben?"

"In the blue suit and black polo neck. Handy having a doctor for your brother-in-law."

"Yes." I glanced across at brother-in-law Ben, a taller, slimmer version of Danny. "He looks young."

"Fourteen years younger than Danny. They were stepbrothers, I think."

On an impulse I asked, "Was he Danny's doctor also?"

She nodded. "They never paid a bean for medicines."

Malice must be infectious. This wasn't Mean-mouth speaking. This was a short, chunky woman in a grey suit. She introduced herself as their neighbour. Not for much longer, it seemed. "Merle

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told me she'll be off to warmer climes now. She was always complaining about the winters here, was Merle."

"To live, you mean?"

She nodded. "Spain, I expect."

I remembered the life insurance payout. Merle's antique had, after all, turned out to be worth something if she was emigrating. Watching the newlyweds at their wedding reception, only four years ago, it hadn't crossed my mind to rate Danny as an insurance claim. Had it occurred to Merle?

What a sour thought to have at a funeral! I banished it. Instead I talked to the neighbour about the weather until she got bored and wandered off.

I did some circulating of my own and joined a crowd at a table in the main bar I recognised as more of Danny's close family. They all had large teeth and lopsided grins like his. A man who looked like another younger brother was saying what a shock his death had been. "Fifty-seven. It's no age, is it? He was always so fit. I never knew Dan had a dicky heart."

"He didn't look after himself," a woman said.

"What do you mean—didn't look after himself?" the brother retorted. "He wasn't overweight."

"He didn't exercise. He avoided all forms of sport. Never learned to swim, hold a tennis racket, swing a golf club. He thought jogging was insane."

"He danced like a dream."

"Call that exercise? He never worked up a sweat. I tell you, he didn't look after himself."

"He had two wives," one of the men chipped in.

"Not at the same time," another woman said, giggling.

"What are you saying—that two wives strained his vital powers?"

There was some amusement at this. "No," said the man. "*You* said he didn't look after himself and I was pointing out that he had two women to do the job."

"That's what marriage is for, is it, Charlie?" the woman came back at him. "So that the man's got someone to look after him?"

"Hello, hello. Have you turned into one of those feminists?" retorted Charlie.

"I'm sure being looked after wasn't in Danny's mind when he married Merle," said the giggly woman.

"We all know what was in Danny's mind when he married Merle," said the feminist.

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Resisting the temptation to widen the debate by asking what had been in Merle's mind, I went back to the bar for a white wine. When I picked it up, my hand shook. A disturbing possibility had crept into *my* mind. The law allows a doctor considerable discretion in dealing with the death of a patient in his care. Provided that he has seen the patient in the two weeks prior to the death, and the cause of death is known to him and was not the result of an accident, or suspicious circumstances, he may sign the death certificate without reporting the matter to the coroner. Merle's brother-in-law Ben had treated Danny.

Across the bar, Ben was talking affably to some people who hadn't attended the funeral. This was his village, his local. Most of the family lived around here. He was at ease. Yet there was something more about his manner, a sense of relief; or perhaps it was triumph.

As for Merle, she was remarkably animated for a woman who had only just buried her husband. It must be an act, a brave attempt to get through the day without weeping, I tried telling myself. Watching her, I wasn't convinced. Her eyes shone like a bride's.

Another curious thing I noticed was that Merle spent time with everyone in that bar except her doctor brother-in-law, Ben. She kept away from him as if he were radioactive. Yet they were keenly aware of each other. Each time Merle moved, Ben would look across and check her position. Occasionally their eyes locked briefly. I was increasingly convinced that they had agreed not to be seen talking together. They weren't being hostile; they shared a secret.

When I left about six, the party was still going on. I didn't blame anyone for turning it into a wake. I was sure Danny would have approved. He would have been in the thick of the junketing, well pickled by this time, full of good humour, just as long as he didn't have to buy a round.

My unease about the circumstances of Danny's death dispersed within a week. I had more urgent things going on in my life that don't play any part in these events except that by February, six months after the funeral, I was tired and depressed. Then someone made things worse by breaking into my car and stealing my credit cards. The police were useless. The only positive thing they suggested was that I inform the people who issued the cards. When my shiny and pristine replacement cards arrived, I had an impulse to use them right away to give myself a boost. I walked into a travel agent's and booked two weeks in the sun. Immediately.

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In Florida, I spotted Merle Fox. By pure chance, or fate, I walked into the Guild Hall Gallery on Duval Street in Key West and there she was, looking at stained-glass pictures of fish. She'd bleached her hair and cut it short and she was deeply tanned and wearing a skimpy top and white trousers that fitted like a second skin. Something new in widow's weeds, I thought unkindly—for I recognised her straightaway. Of course, she hadn't altered her features, but her stance was the giveaway, the suggestion of swagger in the shoulders. It was no different from the way she'd swanned around the bar of the Red Lion after Danny's funeral.

I didn't speak to Merle. In fact, I moved out of range, hidden from her view by a rotating card-stand. But when she came out of the shop I followed, intrigued, you may say, if you don't call me nosy. I was pretty inconspicuous in T-shirt and shorts, like most of the tourists strolling along the street.

Halfway along Duval Street she turned up a side road that was mainly residential and lined with two-story Bahamian-style wood-frame buildings shaded by palms and wild purple orchid trees and fronted by white picket fences. She walked two blocks (with me in discreet attendance) and let herself into an elegant three-bay house with a porch and—more irony here—a widow's walk. Had I really seen Merle? The moment she'd stepped out of my view I became doubtful. It isn't the custom in Key West to have one's name on the mailbox, so it was difficult to make certain without speaking to the woman. I wasn't sure I wanted a face-to-face.

I crossed the street for a longer view of the house. The shutters were open, but the louvred windows effectively screened the interior.

You wouldn't believe that a leafy street bathed in sunlight could make you feel uneasy. After the crowds on Duval Street, this was eerie in its quietness.

A cat leaned against my shin and made a plaintive sound. I stooped to stroke it.

A voice startled me. "We call him Rocky, after the boxer. He has the most formidable front paws."

I looked behind me. This elderly woman had been sitting unnoticed in her porch swing in front of a small white house.

"He's a champion," I remarked, wondering if my luck was still running. "I was looking for a friend of mine who came to live in Key West. Mrs. Fox. Do you know her?"

She paused some seconds before answering, "I can't say I do."

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"She must have arrived sometime in the last three months," I ventured. "She's a widow."

"The only lady who came to Southard Street since the summer is Mrs. Finch in the house across the street, and she's no widow," she informed me.

My confidence ebbed. "Mrs. Finch, you said?"

"Mrs. Merle Finch, from England. They're both from England."

"Ah. That wouldn't be the lady I know," I said, mentally turning a back-flip of triumph. "But thank you for your help, ma'am. Rocky is a cat in a million." I walked away, reflecting that Merle must have kept her hair extra nice to have charmed Mr. Finch, whoever he was, into such a quick marriage. A little over six months since she had buried Danny, she was remarried, settled in her new home. If her tan was any guide, she had already been in Florida some time.

The big insurance payout, the death certificate provided by her brother-in-law, the quick marriage, and the escape to Florida. Had they all been planned? Was it any wonder I felt suspicious?

My holiday routine altered. Next morning I made sure of passing the house on my way to the shops. I lingered across the street for ten minutes or so. Wherever I went in Key West I was hawk-eyed for another sighting.

It came the next evening. Merle stepped out of Fausto's Food Palace on Fleming Street, crossed my path to a moped, and put her bag on the pannier. My heart rate stepped up. The hours of watching out for her, passing the house and so on, had made me feel furtive. Now I was ready to panic. Ridiculous.

I don't like being sneaky. That isn't my nature. I like to be straight with people. Confrontation is the honest way. So I steeled my nerves, stepped towards her, and said, "Hi, Merle."

She stopped and stared.

"Remember me?" I said. "Danny's oppo from his air force days. Isn't this amazing? I must buy you a drink."

She couldn't deny her identity. Recovering her poise, she said in her very British accent that she would have been delighted, but she had to get back to the apartment. She had something cooking.

I almost laughed out loud at the phrase. Instead I insisted we must meet and suggested a nightcap later at one of the quieter open-air bars. She had a hunted look, but she agreed to see me there at ten.

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"You got your wish, then," I said when we shared a table in a dark corner of the bar drinking Margaritas.

"What do you mean?" She was tense.

"A warm place to live. I presume you live here."

"Yes, I do."

"And not alone. You're Mrs. Finch now."

She frowned. "How did you know that?"

"I was told. Is he British, your husband?"

She gave a nod.

"Anyone I know?"

She said, "Why are you asking me these things?"

I said, "What's the matter? Don't you want to talk about them?"

She said, "I left all that behind. It's painful. I don't want to be reminded."

"I wasn't reminding you about the past, Merle. I was enquiring about the present. Your present husband. What's his name?"

She took a long sip of her drink. "Have you seen him?"

"No. But I'd love to meet him—if you let him out."

She pushed aside the drink. "I'll pay for these. I'm leaving."

I put a hand on her arm. "I'm sorry. That was insensitive. Don't take offence."

She brushed my hand away and got up. I didn't follow. I knew it would be no use. I *had* been insensitive. But she had fuelled my suspicions. She had behaved like a guilty woman. Meeting me had been an unpleasant shock. The geography of the Florida Keys—the long drive south from Miami over bridges that span the sea—fosters a feeling of escape, of reaching a haven in Key West bathed in sun and goodwill. You don't expect sharp questions about your conduct.

I believed Merle and her brother-in-law Ben had conspired to murder Danny. A lethal injection seemed the most likely means. Ben had written something innocuous on the death certificate and Merle had claimed the insurance, paid Ben for his services, and escaped to Florida to marry her lover, the fascinating Mr. Finch.

I believed this, yes. But it was only belief so far. The evidence I had was circumstantial. A cheap funeral, an alleged insurance payout, some sly glances, and a quick marriage. None of this was sufficient to justify fingering Merle for murder.

Unable to sleep that night, I asked myself why I wanted to pursue the matter, for it was taking over my holiday. Was it anything as high-minded as a concern for justice? Or was it morbid curiosity?

No.

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It was more personal. Danny had been important in my life. The link between us was stronger than I'd admit to anyone. I was angry, deeply angry, at what I believed had happened. Our lives had touched only intermittently since 1961, and I regretted that. Face it, I thought. His murder killed a part of you.

Yet I knew if I pursued this, I was putting myself at risk. If I threatened Merle with exposure, I would give her a reason for killing me. Or having me killed.

These were the thoughts I grappled with the next day. They made me sick with self-disgust because I had discovered I was a coward. I was scared to do any more about my suspicions. I despised myself.

So I became a tourist again, instead of a snoop. I lounged by the hotel pool in the morning and later took a trip to the coral reef in a glass-bottomed boat. I spent an hour in the cemetery. Morbid, you may think, but the gravestones are on the tourist trail. I found the famous epitaph "*I told you I was sick.*" It didn't seem funny when I saw it.

Late in the afternoon, I had a quiet drink in one of the smaller bars on Duval Street, watching the movement of people towards Mallory Square. There's a tradition in Key West that people converge on the dock to celebrate the sunset. When I'd finished my drink, I joined them.

I didn't expect to meet Merle there. As a resident, she'd regard the sunset spectacle as a sideshow for tourists. Even so, as I sidled through the good-natured crowd I caught myself looking more than once at women who resembled her and the men they were with. I still wanted keenly to catch a glimpse of Mr. Finch, the new husband.

The sky became pastel blue and the sun dipped towards the sea, becoming ever more red. The heads of some of the crowd were in silhouette. At one end a tightrope was slung between tripod posts and the performer was teasing his audience, keeping *them* in suspense with patter and juggling. I ambled on, past a guitarist and a dog trainer. Ahead, someone else had drawn a fair crowd. A fire-eater, I guessed. There's something hypnotic about the sight of a flame, particularly in the fading light. But I decided the aerialist would be better value and I turned back. I was actually retracing my steps when I heard a scratchy sound that froze my blood, an old 78 record of a band playing some song from way back. It was coming from behind the crowd at the end.

I returned, fast.

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I couldn't see for the tightly packed people. I circled the crowd in frustration while that infernal tune blared out. Unable to contain my feelings, I scythed through the crowd saying, "I'm sorry, I have to get through"—until I had a view.

Danny was wowing them in his straw hat, blazer, and flannels, hoofing it just as smoothly as he had in the old days. Far from dead, he had a better colour than most of his audience. The old Gramophone was behind him on the ledge, grinding out "Let's Face the Music and Dance."

He saw me and winked.

I stared back, stunned. Maybe I should have rejoiced, but I'd grieved for this fraudster. I was more angry than relieved. It was a kind of betrayal.

Coward that I am, afterwards, when the sun had set and the crowds had dispersed, I sat tamely with Danny on a ledge of the sea wall at the south end of the dock, our backs to the sea. He had a six-pack of Coors that he systematically emptied. Dancing, he explained, was thirsty work. He offered me some, and I declined.

"Merle told me she met you," he admitted. "She didn't want me to come out tonight, but I'm a performer, damnit. The show goes on. She doesn't understand that you and I go back a long way. You wouldn't blow the whistle on your old RAF buddy."

I didn't rise to that. "You've played some cool poker hands in your time, Danny, but this beats everything. I don't know how you managed it."

He grinned. "No problem. My stepbrother Ben is my doctor. He signed the death certificate. Merle picked up the life insurance and here we are—Mr. and Mrs. Finch. The fake passports cost us a packet, but we could afford them. Isn't this a great place to retire?"

"But there was a funeral."

"That didn't cost much."

"Too true."

"A lot of them were in on this," he confessed. "My cousin Jerry runs an undertaking business in the next village. He supplied the coffin."

"And a corpse?" I said, appalled.

"A couple of sandbags."

"You're a prize bastard, Danny Fox."

He chuckled at that. "Aren't I just? And the prize is in the bank."

"What you did is sick."

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"Oh, come on," he said. "Who loses out? Only the insurance company. I had to pay huge premiums."

"There were people in that church who genuinely grieved for you."

"Horseshit."

That hurt. "I grieved."

"Jesus—what for?" His eyebrows jutted in genuine puzzlement.

I started to say, "If you don't remember—"

Danny cut me off with, "All that was thirty years ago. And then it was only—"

"Night exercises," I completed the statement for him.

"What?"

"Night exercises. That's what you thought of me, didn't you?" I stood up and faced him. "Admit it. Say it to my face, you skunk."

There was a pause. The night had virtually closed in. Danny upended his last can of beer. "All right, if that's what you heard from Merle, it must be true." He laughed. "Let's face it, Susan. —that's what you were. P.O. didn't stand for Pilot Officer in your case, it stood for pushover."

I said, "That's unbelievably cruel."

Unmoved, Danny told me, "If you really want to know, I couldn't even remember your name that day we met in Brighton. I remembered your car, though."

That was one injury too many—even for a coward like me. The precious flame I'd guarded for thirty years was out. Our relationship had been the one experience in my life that I thought I could call truly romantic. Nothing since had compared to it. Danny had made me feel beautiful, desired, a woman fulfilled.

He knew the pain he had just inflicted. He *must* have known.

"Danny."

"Yes?" He looked up.

By that time Mallory Dock was deserted except for us. The water there is deep enough to moor a cruise liner.

The body of the middle-aged male washed up on Key West Bight a week or so later was identified as that of the man who sometimes danced on the dock at sunset. Nobody knew his name and nobody claimed the body for burial. ●

NOTE: For the second and third place stories in the MWA's fiftieth anniversary contest, turn to pages eighteen and thirty-eight. A list of runners-up appears on page fifty.

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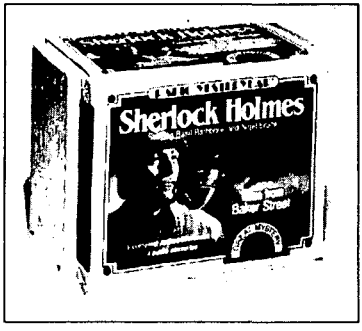

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SECOND PLACE—MWA CONTEST

Second place in the professional category of the MWA's fiftieth anniversary short story contest goes to a team of authors never before seen in print. Two sisters, Mary and Pamela O'Shaughnessy, decided to submit their story to the professional arm of the contest, under the pseudonym Perri O'Shaughnessy, because although they had not yet been published, they had recently signed a contract with Delacorte Press for a novel they wrote together entitled Motion to Suppress. *The book, to be published this July, is a courtroom drama, and is expected to have a large first printing. Their choice of subject matter for both the book and the following award-winning story might be partly explained by the fact that sister Pamela is a lawyer who has, for the moment, given up her practice to write fiction. Mary O'Shaughnessy is a writer by profession, specializing in video documentaries. Both authors live in California. As you read their prose you'll find it hard to believe theirs is not a single voice . . .*

THE LONG WALK

by PERRI O'SHAUGHNESSY

At eleven the phone buzzed. Fleck had been dreaming, gazing out the window at the busy Atlanta street scene four floors down. He punched the conference button and heard the loud tinny voice of Franklin Bell calling from California. "Hey, John," the voice said. "You are a hard man to track down."

"You found me now," Fleck said. He had been relaxed; now he was uneasy. He straightened his back and the action down there snapped into sharp focus.

A woman pushing an arm-waving stroller across the street paused to extricate an angry child while Bell talked through the speakerphone.

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"I got a job for you," he was saying. "The firm has a problem."

"I'm listening." His eyes stayed with the mother on the sidewalk. The child struggled out of her arms, made a break for the street.

"Just how tied up are you in Atlanta?"

"Depends," Fleck said. "What have you got?" By now he was standing, watching the woman tear after her kid.

A roaring semi blasted through Fleck's sightline. The woman launched herself into a tackle, arms out. When the truck had passed, his eyes searched for her again and found her dragging her child across the sidewalk. She picked him up, smacked his butt, and tethered him back into the stroller, tears streaming down her cheeks. Nobody else on the street seemed to have noticed. Fleck sat down, turning to face the wall.

Bell said, "Pete was talking about you the other day. He liked your work on the Ibanez fraud case. I told him I heard you were in Atlanta. He said call you. Confidentially, of course."

Law firms were like that. Discretion was the big virtue, even bigger than turning misery into money. Fleck didn't like Franklin Bell, but he liked Pete Altschuler, Frank's boss, a senior partner at Stevenson, Safik & Morris, Berkeley's best-known law firm. Pete had represented him in the divorce and taken his middle-of-the-night calls, calls he was ashamed of now.

So he waited while Bell moseyed through the local weather report—hot and sunny—and talked about the fraud case, and Pete's mild heart attack, and the latest craziness on Telegraph Avenue, a shootout at one of the college bars—until he got back around to the reason for his call, which was to ask Fleck to catch the Delta redeye Sunday night and meet him and Pete in Berkeley Monday morning to look into something important.

"I've got four more weeks on contract here," Fleck said.

He was working a temporary security job at one of the Peachtree Plaza skyscrapers. He had been in Atlanta several months, and he liked it, the jazz, the bars, the style. In fact, he was thinking about moving here. In Atlanta, people of color could feel comfortable, could forget the race issue much of the time. In Berkeley, his hometown in California, it would always be black folks in the flats and white folks in the hills, white guilt and condescension, black rage. His ex-wife had been white. She still lived in their old house on Grove Street, on the borderline.

"Interrupt it for a couple weeks," Bell said. He kept talking, wheedling, persuasive.

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Fleck let him talk. His mind returned to the memory he had been caressing. Last night in the candlelight, and Charisse in his bed.

In his studio apartment, for the first time, shy with each other, they had moved together to a slow song, bodies slick with heat where they touched. Charisse had started it, dancing him toward a blowing curtain and then past it, to the door of his bedroom. He had forced himself to follow her, lighting the candles by the bed, lifting her onto the pillows. He meant to hold back his emotion, but he couldn't help himself. Groaning, he had buried himself in her soft flickers.

Toward morning, brief thunder and lightning filled the sky off his balcony. Inside, under the sheets, Fleck admired Charisse with his hands. She stirred, mumbling something. Thick drops splashed against the glass. She sat up in bed, reached over to the bedside table for her glasses, wrapped her arms around her knees, and peered out, unselfconscious.

"You ain't goin' nowhere." He had reached up to tug gently at her.

"Fleck fits you," she murmured, looking down at him. "Yellow flecks in green eyes . . . where'd those light eyes come from, your Mama or Daddy? Hey, now . . . hey."

Later, he had rolled his fullback's body out of bed, embarrassed because he knew Charisse was watching him. She got up too, classic as a temple goddess wrapped in the yellow sheet, stretching her brown arms out above her head and yawning. They showered and dressed, then walked together across the concrete plaza toward the concrete tower they both worked in, avoiding the puddles, not hurrying.

Charisse had said, "Having second thoughts?"

"No ma'am. Never. Just scared of my luck," he'd answered.

"Not luck," she said. "Don't you believe in destiny? Paths always cross for a reason." They walked into the building, got into the same elevator they had met in.

"Paths cross by chance," he said. "You never know." Charisse laughed, said, "All those chance events, all those coincidences for the last ten thousand years, all those ancestors, all those travels, all those births and deaths and tragedies and comedies, all that led to you and me meeting right here, going up. Honey, that is destiny."

He had looked at her, so small and sure and important-sounding, having to tilt her head up even in her high heels. He loved how she thought, big thoughts. He wanted to hiss something sweet into her

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ear. Instead, as he stepped out, he touched her cheek, saying, "Doesn't matter why. Here we are."

Fleck wondered how long his silence had lasted. "No. I'll have to pass," he told Bell.

Bell paused. "We'll give you a five-thousand-dollar bonus for the rush."

"Now you have my attention. But get specific, okay?"

"Julie Mattei, remember her? Pete's legal secretary, pretty, ah, black girl, her desk right in front of Pete's door?"

He remembered Julie. He felt the familiar chilly liquid rush up his spine. "Yeah."

"She's dead," Bell said. "Beaten to death, awful thing, on a trail up behind the UC campus, up in the hills. Just after Easter. It's one of those random killings, some joker freaked on the latest street drug."

"She had a nice smile."

"Among other things," Bell said. "Three months now, and your former colleagues at the Berkeley PD still can't find the guy. They had to reopen the trail to the public. They're interviewing all the partners and staff again. They act like they suspect one of us. We're talking major PR problems. The Berkeley press is frothing at the mouth."

"Bring in a few clients," Fleck said.

Bell took him seriously. "This kind of coverage doesn't bring in the right kind of clients. Pete's upset. He got the okay to hire you to look into the murder at the last partners meeting."

"I'm sorry to hear this. But I don't want to come back right now, Frank."

"I'm authorized to offer a further bonus of ten grand if you locate the killer," Bell said, squeezing each word out as if it hurt him.

"Unless it's somebody at the firm," Fleck said.

"Would we be bringing you in if we thought that? Look, you know us; you know Berkeley." Another pause. Bell couldn't resist. "Come on, John, what's the big deal? You need the money, I happen to know."

"I'll call you back," Fleck said. The money, he needed. The job . . . it was wrong to go back there. Stupid, even. He hung up, thought a minute, then called Charisse, waiting impatiently for her line to clear. Finally she said, "Hello?" with that breathy Southern voice she had, and he said, "How about you fly to California with

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me?" She surprised the hell out of him when she said yes.

They flew out Sunday at midnight, first class. Charisse slept the whole way with her head against his shoulder. He froze his arm, not wanting to wake her up. While he sat there, he memorized her, her dark springy hair brushing his face, her full lips parted like a child's, her smooth broad forehead, her long eyelashes resting peacefully on her cheeks. The emptiness in him receded, to be replaced by something he was afraid to name.

He left her in the hotel room in San Francisco, driving his rental car against the traffic over the Bay Bridge the next morning, morning sun assaulting his eyes the whole way. Atlanta had been warm and humid, but above downtown Berkeley, the East Bay hills shimmered dry yellow, the brush desiccating in the August heat. Sun baking him through the driver's window sucked the moisture out of him.

Stevenson, Safik & Morris occupied the third floor of a downtown office building on Shattuck, half a mile from the UC campus. Inside, it felt too cold, too dark.

Franklin Bell hadn't changed. His smooth pasty face was crowned with a short TV-interview haircut, and his muddy eyes appraised Fleck coolly. He didn't offer to shake hands. He'd done the job, brought Fleck in. There was no need to make nice anymore. He motioned at the secretary to bring some coffee and strode off to find Pete Altschuler.

The two white lawyers came into Bell's office together a few minutes later. Pete Altschuler pumped his hand, saying how glad he was to see him. Altschuler had lost weight since the heart attack. When he smiled, the folds in his cheeks made deep parentheses; his lips had turned purplish. He sat down carefully in the other client chair. Bell frowned at both of them, then slid a brown accordion folder stuffed with papers across his wide desk toward Fleck.

"The police reports. Autopsy. Photos. Lab stuff. It's all there. Take it with you," Altschuler said.

"We want you to clear the firm's name," added Bell. "Tamp the rumors. So she worked here; it's not like she got killed at her desk. No, she had to go marching around by herself out there in the hills until a crazy got at her. So much for the feminists." A note of triumph sounded in his voice. Fleck thought, His wife's left him.

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"Are the police focusing on anybody in particular here?" he asked Altschuler.

Altschuler seemed to have used up all his energy shaking hands. "Pete was just about to let her go," Bell interposed. "Her work performance wasn't up to par. She had told some of the other secretaries. She threatened to sue."

"So?" Fleck said.

"She was a flake. She told stories," Bell went on. "Never considered the consequences of her mouth."

"Ah, let's get it over with," Altschuler said in a weary voice. "You might as well hear it from me, John. We were having an affair. She wanted to break it off with me and I wanted to keep her. There were scenes. Everybody here knew about it."

"Why was she breaking it up?" Fleck said.

He shrugged. "Who knows? They never tell you the truth when they want to dump you." His voice was light, but his hands patted his thighs as if he needed comforting.

"Did you kill her?"

Altschuler's smile had turned to a grimace. "No. Guilty? Hell, yes. But not of murder."

"What about your wife?"

"You've got to be kidding. Anne never knew."

Franklin Bell's expression said, yeah, sure. "Who else might have done it?" Fleck asked Bell. "Any ideas, Frank? Not that you knew her well, right, Frank?"

"It's no use looking for a motive," Bell said smoothly, leaning back in his swivel chair, clasping his hands behind his head, elaborately casual. "You of all people know this town, John. Every misfit with a grudge comes to Berkeley. Nobody follows the rules. Nobody leashes 'em. It was somebody she didn't even know. She met him on the trail, he had it in his head to kill somebody that morning, and there she was."

"She lived alone," Altschuler said. "Her mother lives in the city, teaches Anthro at San Francisco State. She played piano, liked Japanese food, worried about her weight, decorated her desk with bottle brush in a vase. This was a good, decent—fine girl, John."

"Have there been any other killings, attacks, anything like that, on that trail?"

"Not this one," Bell said. "But all those hill trails, bad things happen now and then. There was the hillside strangler in Santa

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Cruz. The Tamalpais trail is really scary. Hikers find bodies off the side of that trail every year."

"What about this trail—what is it called?"

"The college kids call it The Long Walk," Bell said. "It's about five miles, winding up from the UC Stadium behind Strawberry Canyon. It's popular with the students, of course, and the hikers and the runners. At the top there's a stretch of flat granite and a rocky place they call The Cave, with a spring. They sunbathe there, rest up before going back down. It happened on a side path near The Cave."

"No witnesses."

"No witnesses, no weapon, no evidence. Somebody just grabbed her and bashed her brains in," Altschuler said. "It's not just for the firm, John. It's for her."

"She was a flake," Bell repeated, "and we really don't need this kind of attention."

"Why did you call me?" Fleck said. "Why do you think I can step in when the Berkeley P. D. can't close it?"

"You worked there all those years. You know how it is," Altschuler said. "Other priorities. Drugs, runaways, domestic violence, foreign students getting robbed and killed, political demonstrations, the annual riots on Telegraph, the big murders, the orders to keep a low profile . . . "

Bell looked bored. He hauled himself out of the chair, said, "It's in the reports," looked at his watch. On cue, his phone buzzed. "Take care," he said. The meeting was over.

"Call me in a day or two, John," Altschuler said at the door into the hall. "Where are you going to start?"

"The Long Walk," Fleck said. He hefted the file under his arm. "You ever been there, Pete?"

"Not me," Altschuler said. His mouth opened in his long mournful face as if he was about to say more, but the door closed, and Fleck was shut out.

Charisse had never been to the huge amusement park of San Francisco. That night they climbed the Coit Tower hill in a balmy sunset and ate at an Italian restaurant in North Beach. Then they drove across the Golden Gate Bridge to Sausalito and had a few drinks on the outside deck at the Reef, looking back over the dark brilliant water toward the glowing city.

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Some kids leaned dangerously over the railing, tossing bits of sourdough. A sea lion barked itself hoarse in the shallows below the deck and Charisse ran over to look. Pelicans and gulls circled and dove. Fleck sat there, too big for the flimsy wicker chair, finishing his drink, the sharp aromatic fumes of the brandy blending with the salt tang of the air. He had read the reports. He should not be on this case.

"So beautiful," she said, pulling her chair out. Her thin dress with its full skirt poufed around her as she sat down and he caught her perfume. "John—"

"Um-hmm." He tossed off the last of his drink.

"Why'd you leave California?"

"Because it smells like death to me," he said. He hadn't meant to say it that way. He didn't want her to be afraid of him. But he wanted her to understand him. She deserved to know what she was getting. It smells like fifteen years of crime scenes, corpses, court, he said to himself, swirling the ice in his glass. Finding the victims in bed, in old abandoned buildings, in the ashes of their homes, in the gutters, on the playgrounds, under the dirt. Always too late to save them. Trying to be satisfied locking up the pathetic killers.

"Working homicide, every day was the same," he went on. "Somebody killed somebody. I found out who was dead, and who did the killing. I found out why they did the killing. More and more, there was no reason. You know, some kid would say, he got in my face, he looked at my girl. Or, I needed a few bucks to buy crack. Or, I just exploded, I can't explain why. Everybody dying, and I couldn't stop it. I come back here and it's just the same."

Charisse covered his hand with hers, shivering. "You're only here for a little bit, and you and me, we're apart from all that."

"Atlanta's still got some of that . . . innocence," he said. "Like you. Not spoiled."

"Maybe you shouldn't have come back so soon, feeling like you do." She turned his hand over, kissed the palm, her lips a bird's wing brushing his skin.

"I came back for the money. There's so much money here. Maybe when I go back to Atlanta, I can buy a little house. Get over it."

"You wouldn't be leaving . . . family here?"

"No. No family. Not anymore. And you? Who do you come with?" he said.

"Aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, dozens of cousins. You should see the party on the Fourth of July," she said.

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"If I'm in Atlanta," Fleck said.

"I hope you will be." She was bold, but her voice was so gentle it sent a root down into his soul. "Listen, John. Let's fly back right now," Charisse went on, her voice half-playful, half-serious. "I feel like—this isn't good for you. Our business is in Atlanta."

"I'll be fine," he said. Fifteen, eighteen thousand, he said to himself. Make me worth knowing, maybe. "Tomorrow I have to get up early. I'll be back to take you to dinner."

"Are you going to take The Long Walk?"

"I have to leave San Francisco before dawn and get over to Berkeley," he said. "The girl was killed early in the morning. I want to check it out at about the same time of day." He stood up abruptly. "Let's get out of here."

While they drove back to the hotel, Charisse rested her hand on his leg. They lay down on the bed as soon as the hotel door closed and kissed for a long time.

Once more he didn't sleep well. He wasn't used to having a warm solid woman pressed against him.

He shifted and her arm swept across his bare chest. Damn her. The only sane thing was not to care.

In the predawn he heard Charisse rustling around, running water in the bathroom, opening the curtains. He had been deeply asleep for the past hour. He felt as if he'd just had his bell rung by Mean Joe Green. He pulled on his khaki pants and T-shirt.

"You didn't have to get up," he told her.

"Do you always bark like that in the morning?"

"I'm working, that's all. I shouldn't have dragged you here. This is a bad place for me."

"I'd like to come with you," Charisse said. "I could use the exercise."

"What? Go on the Walk? Don't be ridiculous," he said coldly. "I'm not putting you in any danger."

"Danger? What danger? It's just a hike."

"I can't be responsible," he said.

"That all happened months ago. Anyway, baby, don't you know me well enough by now to know that this is exactly the way to make me do what you don't want me to do?"

The sentence made them laugh, and cleared the air for breakfast at a greasy diner on the corner. Fleck ate the dripping special Char-

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isse refused. She would go hungry and she would go with him. So be it.

By six they were driving the rental car up University Avenue toward the campus. Nobody was around, unless you counted the heaps in the doorways. The sun cast low warm rays down the long street, its asphalt already storing up heat.

They turned right on Oxford Street and then left on Haste, cruising up the south side of the campus. As they waited for the light at Telegraph, a sharp pain lanced Fleck's stomach. His heart pounded, and his eyes blurred. He said nothing to Charisse, who watched with pity as ragged human shapes slowly pushed their overflowing shopping carts across the intersection.

Fleck had seen the early-morning scene before too many times. Dizzy and angry to be back, somehow he kept driving, parking on Durant near the Greek Theatre two blocks from the Stadium. "Just give me a minute," he said, pulling the key from the ignition and resting his head against the seat back. In a moment he was half-asleep again.

"John?"

"Yeah." He roused himself with difficulty. They got out and he locked up.

Charisse leaned down, tightened her laces, said, "We should have brought a water bottle."

"There's safe water at the top. A spring."

"Okay. You're not going to bring that thing, are you?"

He was strapping on his shoulder holster. He looked at it, and at her. A couple of girls bounced past them, jogging toward the trail, chattering. An old man threw a soggy-looking tennis ball across the tall dewy grass by the fence. His dog sniffed around eagerly, nose-down in the wetness.

"I mean, it'll show, and scare people. And you said the trail's been open a month with no problems."

"A precaution," he mumbled. His eyes had blurred momentarily. He wondered what was wrong with him.

"Put it away, please, John."

Reluctantly, he took the gun and holster and opened the car door, reaching for the glove compartment. Charisse started up the trail, and he followed a moment later, slinging the camera case with its telephoto lens around his neck.

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* * *

The Long Walk, a dirt trail about five feet wide, wound along the side of the Stadium. A jogger pounded past them on the trail, his ponytail flying. They fell in behind a middle-aged couple leaning on walking sticks, arguing in German.

"Just a hike," Charisse said again, squeezing his hand. Now that he was moving, Fleck felt better. The temperature must already be over eighty degrees. In March, when Julie Mattei died, it must have been much cooler.

The trail began to climb and they left the athletic field behind. They passed a few people, and most passed them. Some of them said hi; most ignored them. Representatives of the Berkeley social hodgepodge, greybeards, couples with dogs, and loners hiked the path. Fleck didn't need to read minds to picture the broad fields they ranged: the sane, the crazy, the mild, the wild.

They all thought they were free, but they all were walking the death beat every minute of their lives, and he'd given up trying to save them.

Julie, just like these young women looking so arrogant and confident this morning, had walked past this clump of manzanita three months ago, directly into the path of a truck. No. He shook his head to clear it. That was the kid in Atlanta, the one with a loving mom standing by to change his history.

Charisse looked out of place in tailored shorts and pristine white shoes rising above the dust. He must, too. These hills attracted whites, except for a group of Asian boys they passed, sitting on rocks loading their cameras, and one other black girl who passed them with a wave, tall and broad-shouldered as a basketball player. They watched the girl's muscular calves disappear around the first curve.

The walkers thinned out after the first mile. Fleck and Charisse walked along a ridge, the golden underbrush on their left climbing the hillside, poison oak the only green, fresh and glistening everywhere. They passed more stands of sharp-branched manzanita. Now and then they got into culverts and flats where looming eucalyptus trees cast shapes across the path, their old acorns littering the ground, releasing a dry pungency that made his stomach churn.

He was sweating. The sun reflected off the ground and speared his eyes under the sunglasses. So Altschuler and Julie had an affair. Fleck wondered if that started before or after she helped break up his own marriage.

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Charisse stopped and reached out to pick a solitary pink flower on the slope. Fleck pulled her back, said, "Drop it."

"Why?" She held on stubbornly.

"The whole hillside's infested. Poison oak. Don't touch any of the plants."

"Hoo, boy." She withdrew her hand, rubbing it on her pants. "Do you think the senior partner killed her?"

"Altschuler? No." She didn't ask why, just sat down on a rock and looked at him with interest.

"How about the guy who called you? Bell."

He said nothing.

"You said the firm was small. He had to know her."

"I walked into his office one night after hours. Just opened the door. It was like a TV comedy skit. He had her over the desk. She pulled her skirt down and turned her back to me. He never mentioned it after that—I thought it was funny, at the time. He never mentioned it to the police, either." Fleck had sat down beside her. "Damn, I am thirsty."

Charisse said. "It was one of them. Or a wife."

Fleck said, "No," again.

"How can you be so sure?" She looked exasperated.

He turned away. "I've done it for so many years. Pete Altschuler, he's a city boy. He wouldn't climb up here to do it. Too worried about his health."

"He could have hired a hit man. A hit man in hiking boots." She smiled, inviting him to join her, but he wasn't in the mood.

"He's not that ruthless," Fleck said as she got up, smoothing her shorts. "He cared for her."

They wound around another corner, through another dry canyon. The sun blazed down. Fleck stumbled and would have fallen if she had not caught hold of his arm.

"John, you're sick. Shouldn't we go down?" Charisse said.

"I'll take a rest on top. You were right about the water bottle."

She let go of him, gave him a playful shove. "Okay, Macho Man," she said. "Why not Bell?"

"He might poison her. He might get her fired. He might even shoot her. But he'd never get actual blood on his hands."

"But he was hiding the fact he was seeing her!"

"They all hide everything. It's second nature for lawyers."

"Then who did it?"

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Voices carried down the hillside. Three kids, two girls and a boy, descended around the switchback ahead. They were all dressed alike, in jeans torn out at the knees and tank tops, hair tied back with bandannas. "Hot today," the boy offered as he walked by. His nose was peeling under his enigmatic shades. A buck knife sheathed in leather looped through his belt. The girls passed by without a word.

"Nobody murders another person for no reason." Charisse went on. "It's just that the reason isn't obvious—like if it's not money or power or revenge—everything else you lump under general craziness."

He trudged forward, irritated, watching his big feet move up a steep place, step by step.

"For instance, a woman kills her child for what seems like no reason. She's been neglected her whole life, and this is the only way anybody will pay her any attention. So they say she's nuts. They put her in an asylum, but she had her reasons, didn't she?"

"I'm talking about a random crime, not somebody's baby," Fleck said.

"Or think about it. A man goes into his old office with an assault rifle and starts shooting. It's terrible. He didn't even know some of the people he killed. But he could explain it, John. He'd call it a payback. The people represented something to him, something he had to kill."

"Some reasons can't be called reasons." His tongue felt thick in his mouth, and he wasn't even sure she'd heard him. He didn't want to talk anymore. He just wanted to get up the hill.

They had been climbing hard. After a long time, long enough for John Fleck to remember everything about his life in California, his wife's face, Julie's, all the dead faces he had looked into for all those years, wanting to say I'm sorry, I'm so sorry I failed you, they came to an area where the Oakland fire had passed through. The dirt turned black, and all around them stood skinned-looking, fire-seared trees. Across the canyon, on top of the next hill over, distant but clear, they saw bare burned land, a stone chimney still standing guard in the middle of nothing at all.

Fleck said, "Suppose a man's wife leaves him. He blames the woman he was sleeping with . . . is that a reason to kill her? Shouldn't that man have blamed himself?"

Charisse didn't answer. She was watching a tarantula skitter across the path, hairy legs moving much faster than they should.

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She pointed, excited, her hand with the long nails and sparkling rings incongruous in the dirt and heat and stillness. Fleck kicked dust after the spider. "This is what I think," he went on, repressing the moan the pain in his stomach had started. "Julie Mattei hiked up into someone's hate zone. If she hadn't shown up, the next walker would have been killed. Simple as that."

"I don't believe it," Charisse said. "They have their reasons." She left it at that.

Another rest. The pain had settled in his gut, cramping him, making him stop and bend over now and then till the worst of it passed. Charisse was tired too; she had slowed down and she walked with a slight limp. No one had passed them for some time. He was burning with thirst.

This walk was acting on him, replacing the forgetting with awful, fresh memory. Why had he returned?

"John, did your work make you start to think that life is senseless, too?" She went on without waiting for an answer. "Because if it is, then you could do anything to another human being. I mean, what kind of morality would be left?"

"There you go," he said quietly. She didn't hear him.

"Just think of her up here, on an overcast day. A spring day, everything blooming . . . she was thinking about making love the night before, maybe. Or about chicken tarragon for dinner. Then, like this"—she snapped her fingers—"she's gone."

He had stopped to catch his breath and wipe the sweat off his face. Gnats floated around their heads. "If they get too bad, walk with your hands raised above your head for a while," he said. "They circle the highest point."

"Did you ever meet her?" When he didn't answer, she wiped her forehead and repeated the question.

"We went out a few times," Fleck said. The trail had narrowed between two boulders. They were hidden there. You could bury something here easily, he thought. An earthquake right now would bury them together.

If his words had surprised her, she didn't show it. "When did you move to Atlanta?"

Fleck ignored the question. "Doesn't this place scare you, Charisse? A woman died here and all."

Now it was her turn to remain silent.

"I wish you hadn't come today," he said. She stepped backward, her back pressing against the rock.

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"You moved to Atlanta at the end of March. Right after she was killed," she said, her voice low.

"That's right. And you've only known me for two weeks, that's right too." His head swam; he licked his dry lips. The camera banging against his chest had been beating him up rhythmically, with each step. "You look a little like Julie," he said to her. "She was a glamorpuss like you."

He was leaning over her, both hands against the rock above her head. Charisse said levelly, "You're trying to scare me. Why?"

Some tension in him went back into hiding at her words. He moved back from her, said, "You're too trusting."

"Don't play any more games like that, John. I'm not like you. I'm not scared of the world like you."

"You should be," he said. They went on, back out into an open patch of blinding sun.

"We're almost there," he said. "Up another quarter mile, past that stand of pine."

Charisse had stopped again. "What?" he said, then remembered he'd told her that morning he'd never been on The Long Walk. "I forgot," he said. "That's all. I did hike this trail once, a long time ago. Come on, Charisse, don't look at me like that."

"I'm going to go back down the trail."

"No," Fleck said. "It's dangerous." He grabbed her arm, as much to support himself as to restrain her. They stood there on the dusty path in the hard sun. "C'mon. We'll get some water, then we'll go straight down."

She tried to shake him off. He held on.

"Let go of me, John."

She started back down the trail. He took her arm again and turned her around. "No, I'm not letting you go," he said. "We're going to get some water, then we can go back. I'm sorry if I scared you," he was saying to her as he half-pushed her ahead of him up the trail. Silent, tearful, and exhausted, Charisse complied with his direction, which was fortunate since the immense pain that had lodged in his gut had fragmented and he could barely control his limbs. Into a buzzing black shade they climbed, unable to see ahead through the psychedelic play of light and shadows beneath the canopy of leaves.

One more steep incline. The hillside turned rocky. Off to the right, beyond the scarred hillsides, he could now see the whole Bay, a vast glittering silver lagoon dotted with boats, ringed by sunlit cities, the four great bridges connecting the Peninsula and the headlands

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of Marin and the East Bay, San Francisco on the horizon veiled in its gigantic mountain range of white fog, the City of Oakland spread along the water, just below their feet. It all looked so pretty from far away.

One more thick stand of eucalyptus, and the trail abruptly delivered them out onto a flat sweep of granite. On the other side, about a hundred yards ahead, Fleck made out the rock wall, what looked like a depression. The Cave. Where the spring would be, inside and out of sight. On the right, another cliff fell away into miles of air.

"That's it," he said, pointing. "Water." Just saying the word made him lighter. He must have heatstroke, plus whatever else was gnawing away inside him.

Ducking down to enter, he nudged Charisse ahead. The dark blinded him; the coolness immediately started him shaking.

The Cave was a small rock room, lit only by the blazing open arch where they had entered. As his eyes adjusted, he saw Charisse in the corner, her whole head under the spring, her hands splashing up clear water, drinking greedily while it flowed over her head and neck.

Another shadow in the dark, an older man, drank water out of a tin cup, watching Charisse. Fleck put his hand against the cold wall and blinked several times. Some of the faintness went away. The man was a white biker type, tall and brawny, with a heavy gnarled walking stick. He stepped aside into indistinct shadows when he saw Fleck. Charisse came up for air, saw Fleck, and moved back.

Heedless, Fleck dove for the spring.

Freezing! It hurt, burning his head. His neck muscles spasmed. Red waves crashed inside his eyelids—

He slid down on the hard cold floor, his back propped against the wall, choking and sputtering. "Charisse," he gasped as soon as he could speak. "Wait a minute. I'm sick."

Charisse didn't answer. With a sound like a sob she turned and, lowering her head at the arch, ran outside. Fleck was gripped by sick dread. He scrabbled to get up, but he fell into a cramp.

He had to be with her. He got to his knees, shaking his head like a bull, droplets of water flying off his hair. Suddenly he felt the man behind him, wrapping long arms around his chest, pinning his arms.

His dread degenerated into physical panic and he struggled. So it was this stranger, the one he had forgotten to watch. A snap of the fingers—

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Fleck was hauled to his feet. The man stepped back, saying, "You okay, buddy?" Fleck pushed him off, walking unsteadily to the mouth of the cave.

His hand shading his forehead, he saw Charisse out in the glare, crossing the flat, looking so small. The sight of him made her rush off the main path, off to a narrow shaded walkway fringed by exotic red plumes of bottle brush. . . .

She ran up the path where Julie died.

Blind again, each breath a scorching effort, Fleck loped out of the cave after her, hunched over, but she ran hard until she disappeared.

It wasn't until he reached the far end of the flat and made his way to the brush that he saw the sister, the black girl who had waved at them earlier, way up the path beyond him, rising out of the eucalyptus forest behind Charisse. She had to be almost six feet tall, her hair in a natural like pictures he'd seen of Angela Davis in the sixties.

Stepping behind Charisse, the girl wrapped her arms around her neck in a choke hold. They struggled and Charisse fell. The girl went down with her and began methodically beating Charisse's head against the rock—

He tore up the path, his pain forgotten, the biker hollering and waving his stick, following, both trying to scare her off. She jumped up alertly. Charisse wasn't moving at all. Then the girl lifted a heavy stone, grunting a little, and raised it above her head, the muscles on her arms strong and defined as the forelegs of a tiger above its kill—

They heard her say, angrily, almost petulantly, "Renee, you stay dead this time—"

—and Fleck shot her, from fifteen yards away. She fell slowly, as if she had all the time in the world, still holding the stone, eyes wide and startled. Her big handsome body twitched, would never move again—

—and he was holding Charisse, crying out her name. Her eyes were closed and her hair in back was matted with blood.

"Can you make it, pal?" the old biker said. He scooped Charisse up, and they ran down the trail, taking turns with her. Halfway down she opened her eyes and said she wanted to walk, so they supported her the rest of the way.

ER at Alta Bates Hospital admitted her. When Fleck passed out in the waiting room, they admitted him too and pumped the rotten food from his stomach. "Health department closed that place down

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where you ate today. You're our fourth customer," the nurse told him.

He slept then, and a few hours later two officers he knew came to talk to him.

Through the window in her door, on the outside looking in, he could see only the bottom half of her body on the bed, the sheets lifting and falling with her breath, one elegant hand at rest.

She sat up, saw his face in the window, and wiggled a finger at him. "Aren't we a fine pair?" she asked when he came in, twisting to show him the white gauze bandages in back where hair used to be.

He gathered her up. Neither of them talked for a long time, until she said, "You were right to bring the gun. In the camera case, wasn't it?"

"Ex-cop, ever-vigilant. I was afraid—"

"Of me. You think everything around you dies—"

"You almost did. You walked into her zone."

"You didn't let her take me, John. You saved me."

Snatched her off the dangerous street, and loved her.

"It wasn't random," Charisse said. "She had her reasons." She held him even tighter.

Charisse and her big thoughts—

Fleck wondered where she was—Renee, the woman who looked like Julie, who looked like Charisse. Out there, everywhere, women who wouldn't stay dead.

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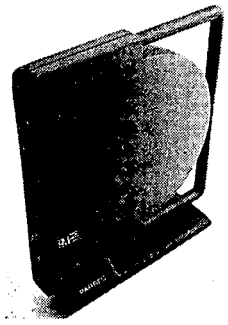

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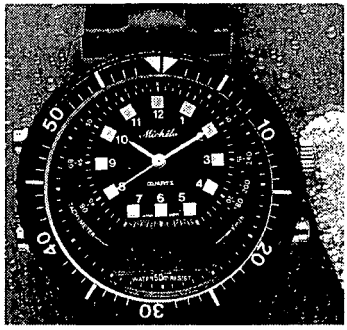

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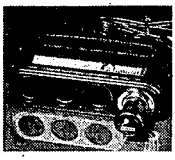

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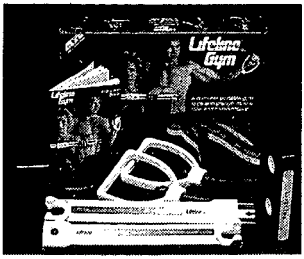

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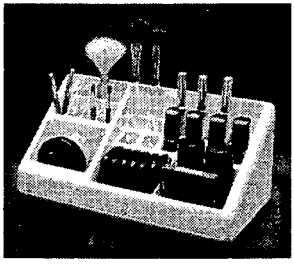

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THIRD PLACE—MWA CONTEST

Claiming third place in the professional category of the MWA's short story contest is British writer Susan B. Kelly. Ms. Kelly is the author of five novels, four of which have been published in this country by Scribner's. Although she is no longer a newcomer to the crime field, she has written only a very few mystery short stories, which makes the aplomb with which she carries off the following humorous piece all the more impressive. Readers who would like to see more of the author's short stories can find them in two of the recent anthologies put out by the Crime Writers Association of Britain and published in the U.S. by St. Martin's Press (see First Culprit *and* Third Culprit, *edited by Liza Cody, Peter Lovesey, and Michael Z. Lewin). Ms. Kelly's most recent novel from Scribner's is entitled* Kid's Stuff *(December, 1994). . . .*

THE BEST SORT OF HUSBAND

by SUSAN B. KELLY

A single woman with a very narrow income must be a ridiculous, disagreeable old maid.

Emma

"My brothers, as you know, Jane, are quite desperate to be rid of me."

I nodded. I did know. I could even see their point. There is no condition worse than impoverished gentility. A lesser man might take himself into trade, forging his own vulgar riches and buying Nottingham lace by the yard for his wife. But a *gentleman*—one who has been to a good school and kept his terms at Oxford—is restricted in his choice of career: the army, the church, the law. None of these pays well since they are professions for gentlemen and assume a modest—or, preferably, immodest—private income.

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It is, in short, a circular problem, since a gentleman without family money and property cannot earn a living as a gentleman—not if he wants to hunt.

It's a paradox which has vexed finer minds than mine and I do not intend to waste any more time on it.

It brings us, however, to the Crampton family and my visitor that day, Miss (Margaret) Crampton. She was the eldest of the four Crampton children and the only girl. Colonel Crampton had died ten years ago—an incident with a shotgun which had made the coroner harrumph a lot before returning an "Accidental" verdict. He had left some impressive debts of honour of which Mrs. Crampton had, until that moment, been happily oblivious.

Her family had reluctantly and meanly rallied round, obliging that lady, who was not a good manager at the best of times, to provide as well as she could for Mr. John, Mr. Richard, and Mr. George and—bottom of the pile, left to the sweepings, the gleanings, when all the rest had been seen to—poor dear Margaret.

Margaret, who had never had much hope of a husband, even before her father's disgrace.

It was not that she was exactly plain: Indeed, I found it hard to account for the fact that she was not at least as handsome as myself. Her features were regular enough—her nose not too long and sharp, as mine is, her eyes a soft and pretty grey, her mouth large and gentle and disinclined to sarcastic remarks, which is a good thing in a woman in need of a husband—but there was something undistinguished about the ensemble, something that made sure no eligible gentleman looked twice.

She had a good, fresh colour to her cheeks that morning and her soft, if overly fine, hair of that pale shade which is not unlike straw, and which was always inclined to escape from her bonnet at ill-timed moments of agitation and exertion, was threatening almost to tumble about her shoulders.

She had taken her bonnet off altogether, since we were old friends and very confidential. She looked sadly at it as it lay on her lap like a dead dog; it was old and shabby, although she dutifully trimmed it anew each spring.

We were sitting in the front parlour, the one with the creaking door which gives me warning of sudden eavesdroppers—maids coming in to shake dusters about ineffectually or Mama fretting over what to order from the butcher for dinner.

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In fact, Mama and dear Cassandra had gone out to bully some of the local poor into being less feckless—indeed, less *poor*—and my guest and I were alone in the house—except for the servants, obviously.

She had agreed to take a dish of tea with me.

"It's not that I have anything against Mr. Bailey," she went on. "He is a gentleman of good fortune, it seems, and refined education. His manners are not objectionable. He has a good address."

"He lives in Curzon Street, I understand, and in Dorset."

"I meant," she said witheringly, "that he has a good upright bearing."

"Oh."

Well, it's an easy mistake to make. And Curzon Street *is* a good address, all the same. As is several hundred acres of Dorset.

"He's not even all that bad-looking," I ventured, "or so I've heard." She shrugged. "In fact there is much to be said for him and his offer."

And single women have such a dreadful propensity for being poor, as I remarked to dear Cassandra just the other day, possibly not for the first time, since a well-turned phrase bears repeating.

"But we know so little of him," Margaret went on, "and now he turns up asking me to marry him, and John and Richard and George are determined to make sure I say 'Yes,' and will make my life a misery if I refuse him, unless I can come up with a really *sound* reason for doing so.

"You see, Jane," she concluded. "I *like* being single."

I sighed in sympathy, although I wasn't sure whom—principally—with. I can see that there is no greater burden for a young man than a plain and fading spinster sister, raised to do nothing useful but know a little French and point out India on a globe, draw a passable imitation of a landscape with three-legged cows, and bang out a few tunes on a twenty-guinea pianoforte.

It was hardly surprising, therefore, that John (etc.) had seized on Mr. Thomas Bailey like a good angel from heaven. Margaret was twenty-nine, after all, and getting to that time of life when ladies are assumed to be fast gathering dust on the shelf.

Gentlemen, I have noticed, seem to think that one husband is as good to their sister as another, so long as he's got money in the bank and the right sort of relations and doesn't spit in the street. They do not think a woman should have irrational prejudices in preferring

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Mr. James to Mr. Henry, or sandy hair to black, or a cavalry moustache to a clean lip.

Still, the temptation was always there: one's own home, a dress allowance, the superior title of "Mrs."; with the right sort of husband it was not to be lightly spurned. With the best sort of husband.

The question was, though: What was in it for Mr. Thos. Bailey?

"You are lucky, Jane," Margaret was saying, "in not being in such a precarious position."

Which I was, I readily admit. True, my sainted father had also died early (although not by his own hand!) and I had as fair a share of brothers as a girl might wish—rather more than Margaret, indeed—in addition to my elder sister Cassandra.

Like Margaret, I had no money of my own with which to buy a husband and, also like her, no real wish to possess such a commodity.

The crucial difference between us was that my brother Edward had been adopted in infancy by my rich and childless cousin, Mr. Knight, and had now come into his inheritance and was in a position, therefore, to offer Mama and us two spinster girls this small but comfortable cottage in the village of Chawton for as long as we should require it, and to guarantee us against starvation.

Which was just as well, since anybody less well equipped than I to go a-governessing is hard to imagine. I can see myself running amok and laying about me with a stick at all the Miss Julias and Miss Matildas that are inflicted on me; then being sent home on the first post chaise in disgrace, having broken Master Peter's pate when he answered me back.

"He is thirty-five," Margaret continued, musing almost to herself, "claims to have a clear four thousand a year. There are two children, of course. A boy and a girl."

"Yes," I said, since this was partly the point at issue. "What exactly did happen to his first two wives?"

It's not at all unusual, of course, to lose one wife in childbed, or to consumption, or any one of the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to, which is why middle-aged spinsters never lose hope, since there are always gentlemen coming back, as it were, on the market, only slightly shop-soiled. Occasionally they take the opportunity to marry some pretty young flibbertigibbet, but usually they want someone older and steadier, someone who will be a housekeeper and mother to their little orphans without producing more mouths to feed and backs to clothe and brains to cram with useless facts.

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Two, though? Bad luck at the very least. And yet . . . if Margaret had been an heiress it would make sense, but she was not, far from it.

"He has gone on to Bath," my friend said, "and is coming back at the end of the month for my answer."

I began to see.

"I thought that since you, my dear Jane, are leaving for Bath at the end of the week . . . " She broke out suddenly, quite wringing her poor bonnet with her hands. "Oh, how I wish I could go to Bath! To spend the winter there in gaiety! What I would give!"

"But what am I to do? I'm not some sort of *spy,* Margaret."

"Just talk to his acquaintance. Watch him. Observe him at your leisure, and at his. Find out for me what measure of man this is that I am to tie myself to on such slight knowledge. Or, better still, give me a good reason—some vice, some sordid secret—" she lowered her eyes and her voice demurely, keeping up the seemly pretence that we single women know nothing of such matters "—some *woman* of the lower orders living under his protection—that will allow me to hang onto my respectable spinster state without fraternal reproach."

Well, I could hardly say no, could I?

But are they all horrid, are you sure they are all horrid?
Northanger Abbey

As chance would have it, I found myself that Friday being gallantly escorted to Bath by Mr. Richard Crampton, who had business at the Assize session the following week. Mr. Dick was the middle son, now twenty-four and a barrister, having qualified for this role in life by taking a degree at Oxford and eating the requisite amount of dinners at Gray's Inn.

I prayed earnestly that I would never have need of his services. It was to be hoped, for the sake of his future progress in his sphere, that he stood far enough away from the judge to spare him his bad breath.

Me, he did not spare.

Like all the brothers, Dick was a thickset, florid, somewhat *lumbering* young man of not above middle height. His sandy hair limped out from under his hat and hung over his meagre eyes with their invisible lashes. He had little conversation beyond horses, politics,

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and the recent wars against the French. Of the poems of Sir Walter Scott and the novels of Mrs. Fanny Burney or Mrs. Radcliffe, he had no opinion.

Of himself, he had a very good opinion.

He was a commonplace young man, like every young man I have ever met, except perhaps one, and he is dead. I am glad that, at almost forty, I may finally be considered safe from any matrimonial consideration whatsoever and may assume the chaperone's role by the fire with a glass of warm wine, although there was a time, when we first moved to Chawton, when I might have been induced to marry the Reverend Mr. Papillon, purely for the pleasure of being Mrs. Butterfly.

I was never put to the test, however, Mr. Papillon being very set on maintaining his bachelor state.

And all of which is quite beside the point.

Mr. Dick drove competently. The journey seemed to take forever.

He was inordinately proud of the fact that Captain John Crampton had been wounded in the leg at the battle of Vitoria three months earlier. I couldn't help thinking that Master Jack, had he been quicker on his feet, and a bit less *lumbering,* might have dodged the French sabre or musket or whatever it was, but I did not say so.

It was hardly *new* news, anyway. I know the latest excitement often takes a long time to reach our quiet corner of Hampshire, but John Crampton had been sitting at home with his leg up on a stool since mid-July and it was now early September. I had already heard several times how he had personally put Buonaparté's forces to rout and had had to throw a fake faint last time the story threatened.

Luckily, the Crampton brothers are the sort of men who are always expecting women to faint on them. Except for maidservants, obviously.

We finally lapsed into silence and I was able to peruse the volume of Cowper I had brought along with me for the journey in peace.

Young Mr. George, by the way, had opted for the church and had become positively unctuous since being ordained the previous summer. If all three brothers had gone into the same profession, of course, they might have helped each other on, but were they bright enough to think of that?

Were they—!

Although I suppose, between the three of them, they had everything pretty well covered.

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Dear Margaret was worth more than all of them put together, and I was determined to help her out of her predicament if I could.

I loathe Bath, as everybody knows, but I had not been in the best of health all summer and Mama would simply not hear of my turning down the invitation to spend a few weeks in Queen Square with my brother Edward, and with Fanny, Lizzy, Marianne, and the rest of his girls, to bathe and drink daily in the spa.

At least this time I had something to keep me occupied. So no sooner had I settled in and supervised the unpacking of my trunk and the disposition of my gowns, than I donned a pair of pattens as insurance against mud, took my new pelisse in case it turned cold and a parasol against sudden sun, and, thus prepared for all eventualities, announced that I was just taking a brisk walk to the Pump Room to see if any of my acquaintance was in town.

I successfully fended off all offers to accompany me . . . except those of my brother Henry, who was still mourning the loss of his wife Eliza six months earlier and whom I had not the heart to gainsay.

Henry was no trouble as an escort, in fact, having little to say for himself these days and a great deal of sighing to do, which enabled us to proceed on our way in companionable silence. I was slightly surprised that he had chosen to bring his wounded heart to a bustling social place like Bath, but I knew that since Eliza's death he had been besieged by eager spinsters who could spot a well-to-do, gentlemanlike widower across thirty miles and without spectacles and who had no compunction about moving in for the kill. No doubt he had left Chelsea to escape from a particularly persistent specimen.

I had no difficulty in spotting Mr. Bailey at the Pump Room, since he was in the company of Richard Crampton, the two seeming very confidential. They were together too at the concert at the Assembly Rooms that evening and to be seen walking arm in arm in the Circus the following morning. They were like Mary and her wretched lamb, in that everywhere Mr. Bailey went, Mr. Dick was sure to go.

Presumably he was making sure that Bailey didn't change his mind about marrying Margaret or get entrapped by some widow of an certain age and uncertain income while no one was looking.

I contrived an introduction in the Lower Rooms the next afternoon, although Mr. Dick looked as if he would have avoided it if he could, mumbling my name and the apologetic, "A neighbour in

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Chawton." I then had a strained conversation with Mr. Bailey about the latest uses of electricity to treat gout, from which ailment, he hastened to assure me, he did not suffer. As I did not suffer from it either, the subject did not seem to be leading anywhere very fruitful.

An everyday sort of man, I concluded, as would make a respectable husband for a poor spinster and leave a bit over. His complexion was a little pockmarked when you got close up, but you would cease to notice that by the end of the wedding journey. He might be growing a little stout under his waistcoat, but what can you expect at five and thirty? At least the waistcoat itself was tastefully restrained—plain white marcella—which is by no means guaranteed these days, what with HRH the Prince Regent and his ornate friend Mr. Brummell setting the fashion.

He didn't have the ruddy complexion or well-veined nose of a two-bottles-of-claret-a-day man, and his hands, as he offered to lead me back to my seat after the interval, were the pale, soft, well-kept sort you don't associate with vice. I was beginning to think that I could be of no use to my friend in discovering Mr. Bailey's guilty secret.

Where so many hours have been spent in convincing myself that I am right, is there not some reason to fear I may be wrong?

Sense and Sensibility

Henry seemed to take a fancy to him, though, and soon the two of them were swopping gloomy stories of dead wives over the foul-tasting water in the Pump Room every morning. I had not taken my brother into my confidence, but took the opportunity every evening to pump *him* in turn about what his new friend had said to him.

Henry's opinion was that Tom Bailey was a lonely, affectionate man, unlucky to have lost two wives in only ten years, who just wanted a nice woman to share his house and sit at the foot of his table, who needn't be handsome so long as she was good-natured and kind to his children and brought a few thousand pounds in the four percents to pay for her own keep.

Which was part of the problem: Margaret would be lucky to have two hundred pounds of her own and that not until Mrs. Crampton was dead. I did not mention this to Henry, who was not acquainted with the Crampton family or their situation.

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So it was in his capacity as Henry's friend that Mr. Bailey was invited to a small private ball at Queen Square about ten days later. Mr. Richard Crampton, who was still in Bath despite the Assize being long over, was also invited as a Chawton man and my friend's brother. The Reverend George Crampton, who had recently arrived in town and who did not allow his clerical orders to prevent him from dancing *(lumberingly)* and drinking, had apparently invited himself.

Henry threw his head into his hands at the very mention of dancing and gaiety and determined not to attend, but Edward wasn't going to let that spoil anyone else's fun, and I personally was looking forward to tripping a measure and showing off my new spotted muslin . . . and exposing my bosom with the best of them.

I cannot imagine what it is like to lose a beloved spouse, of course, although I grieved long and hard for my father in the year five, but it seemed to me that Henry, who is of a naturally optimistic disposition, was beginning to show signs of recovering spirits and might have been badgered into attending the festivities had anyone tried hard enough, but as no one could be bothered, he was stuck with his original insistence that it would be too painful for him.

I was not particularly surprised, therefore, to find him hanging around in the anteroom to the best drawing room halfway through the evening, sipping punch and observing without being observed from behind a purple velvet curtain. I had danced every dance and was feeling tired, especially having had my left ankle repeatedly kicked by The Rev. George in the quadrille, so took the chance to sit with him for a while.

So it was in this manner, as in all the best novels of Mrs. Fanny Burney and Mrs. Radcliffe, that we came to overhear one of those odd and illuminating conversations that seem to occur only in books, this one being between Richard and George Crampton, carried out with the utmost safety—as they thought—under cover of the hubbub.

"Has Margaret been brought to consent?" asked Dick.

"Not yet, but she will, with promises of new bonnets and threats of our displeasure. It is for her own good, after all, and it's not as if she will have to tolerate him for very long."

"But she doesn't know that, and must not. My sister is a woman of such high moral principle, such refined and truly delicate and feminine sensibilities—"

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"Yes, yes," George interrupted him. "How is the groom, more to the point?"

"Happily convinced that my father secreted a large fortune in gold and gems before his . . . "

"Accident."

"Quite. In a place where his creditors would never find them."

"Thus enabling us to provide Margaret with a suitable marriage portion. Have you drawn up the settlement?"

"I have."

"And is it watertight?"

"It is. The children will have to be provided for on his death, of course, but my sister will still be a very wealthy widow. He has no close family to kick up a fuss, as you know."

(I have noticed that these sorts of conversations in books always usefully have people telling other people things they already know.)

"Splendid!" George rubbed his hands together and I could hear the slap of sweat. Wet-palmed George the Cramptons' maidservants called him when they thought no one was listening, and they should know. "Then I shall carry out the wedding service, quietly and discreetly as befits a double widower and an ageing spinster, then—"

"Then," Dick concluded for him, "the lawyer will have done his bit and the rector will have done his bit and it remains only for the 'wounded' soldier to do his bit."

"Which no one will suspect since our hero is laid up at home with a bad cut in the leg from the cowardly Frenchies and cannot leave the house."

They both laughed, and a few minutes later I heard them move off, back into the dance.

Well, I did say they had everything covered between the three of them. Pity there wasn't a fourth brother who was a doctor, to attest that there had been no foul play, and a fifth who was an undertaker—not that either of those was a suitable career for a *gentleman*.

I glanced at Henry to see how much he had heard or understood, but he was miles away.

"Eliza was always at her loveliest at social gatherings," he bleated. "I fell in love with her at such a private ball as this, all dressed in white, her glorious hair in those . . . curl things women used to wear in the nineties."

He began to cry.

"Henry?"

He hiccupped. "Yes, Jane?"

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Too much punch.

I wrote to Margaret by the next post, laying all before her. I did feel rather pleased with myself at having succeeded in carrying out my commission and with such speed, although naturally I played down the role of good fortune in revealing the plot to me and emphasised my own skill and wit. Margaret could now confront her brothers with their iniquity or, perhaps, just rid herself of Mr. Bailey by letting drop the fact that there was no secret treasure, no dowry.

The confrontation need not be long delayed, since the Crampton brothers left Bath four days later, taking Mr. Bailey with them to get their sister's answer. I rather wished he might know to whom he owed his deliverance, but there was no real hope of that, and I got on with my holiday-cum-rest-cure, walking about with Henry and visiting the theatre and taking a little chaise out to Clifton one day.

I was surprised to receive a letter from Cassandra two weeks later, arriving the very day of my own departure from Bath. I thought any news she had to convey might have awaited my return. But this was too new, too exciting; she could not contain herself.

I learnt to my astonishment that Margaret Crampton and Mr. Bailey had been married by special license just five days earlier. So my dear friend had come to like him after all, chosen to accept his offer and link her destiny with his.

Of all the dreadful luck.

It was with sinking heart that I read on. I was sadly not at all astonished to learn that Mr. Bailey had met with a fatal accident while out riding the very next day. He had been quite alone, according to Cassandra, taking an early run on one of Mr. Jack's best hunters, which was in sore need of exercise with its master laid up.

"The poor creature must have bolted and stumbled into a rabbit hole," my sister wrote, "throwing its rider unconscious onto his head.

"If anyone had been with him, of course, something might have been done, but it was several hours before anyone feared for his safety and set out to look for him, and by then it was too late."

Cassandra, my dear kindhearted sister, was distraught on Margaret's behalf, imagining her sorrow and dismay, widowed not four and twenty hours after her wedding breakfast.

How, I wondered, could my letter have so tragically miscarried? The post was usually reliable. I blamed myself; I was in anguish. By what cruel fate had Margaret not been warned in time?

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* * *

A large income is the best recipe for happiness I ever heard of. It certainly may secure all the myrtle and turkey part of it.

Mansfield Park

The hasty funeral was over and the new widow away in London by the time I reached home, so I was none the wiser and still full of self-doubt. I watched the post daily as it came to the Cramptons' mean house along the Winchester Road, expecting to see my letter, inexplicably delayed, arriving too horribly late. I wondered if there was any means of intercepting it, since for her to read it now . . .

It was not to be thought of.

She was dealing with the house in Curzon Street—although one would have expected Richard to volunteer for this sad task—consulting her husband's bankers and men of law and disposing sensibly of the poor children to boarding school.

She did not return for a month, and when she did I scarcely knew my friend, so stiff and formal had she become, actually *curtseying* to me instead of shaking my hand.

I remembered to call her Mrs. Bailey, although she hardly seemed entitled to the name after such a short tenure, and noticed that her gown, while obviously the deepest mourning, was also the latest style and the best silk. She had equipped herself with a little carriage, too, with the prettiest pair of ponies you ever saw and a footman in scarlet livery.

"Dear Jane." She unbent a little and took my hand as I murmured my shocked condolences. "How good it is to see you again. Always the dearest friend, always the best of *correspondents*."

She moved to Bath herself soon after, and I occasionally see her there in the distance, out of mourning now and dressed in the height of fashion, surrounded by beaus and sycophants and flatterers, dining with the best people, reserving the most expensive box at the theatre for her exclusive use.

She has a new bonnet every week.

She has not remarried since she was, as she had told me, very satisfied with the unmarried state, and since widows, unlike spinsters, were not so very inclined to be poor. She seemed more than satisfied with her lot, having procured for herself the very best sort of husband.

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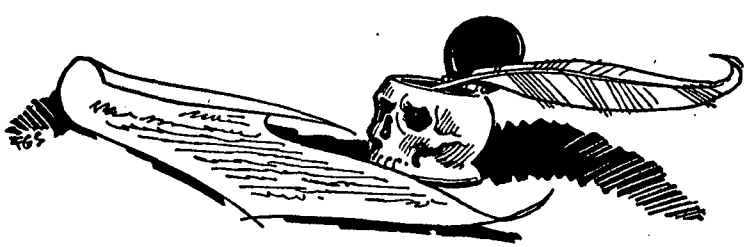
She always waves if she sees me, although often she does not seem to see me, which is just as well, I think, since I am the only one outside the family who knows the truth and she is the only one who knows that I know and I value my skin as much as the next woman.

I have nothing more to say on this subject. I have novels to write. I think I shall set one in Bath one day, although there will not be any murders in it since murders are not my thing.

Fiction, whatever anyone says, is always much stranger than truth. ●

Runners-up in the MWA 50th Anniversary Contest

EQMM would like to extend congratulations to the following seven runners-up in the professional category of the Mystery Writers of America short story contest: Andrew Coburn for "A Woolf in Vita's Clothing"; Jean B. Cooper for "The Judge's Boy"; Bill Crenshaw for "War Stories: Righteous Shoot"; Kathleen Dougherty for "When Your Breath Freezes"; Philip Lovesey for "Double Event"; William J. Pomidor for "A Plain and Honest Death"; and Joan Richter for "The Oak's Long Shadow."



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Since his retirement from the NYPD after twenty years of service, Bob Leuci has spent a great deal of his time lecturing and teaching on subjects ranging from police ethics to narcotics and organized crime. Part of his career with the police department is chronicled in the book and film Prince of the City, *and he draws on a career cop's experiences in his own writing too, in the five novels he has had published with Freundlich Books, New American Library, and St. Martin's Press. Mr. Leuci's story for us recalls what it can be like during those first few months on the job . . .*

ALL-AMERICAN BOY

by BOB LEUCI

He could make anyone feel like they were old and slow, soft and lazy. By my recollection, at that time we were both twenty-four, except, in his company, I felt half his age. The guy was strange, stranger than anyone I knew, and let me tell you, the competition was pretty stiff.

"Partner," he said, grabbing my wrist and lifting my arm so I could see. "You should be working out, doing curls with some weight, push-ups, and leg raises. You are not very strong."

I didn't know if he believed me anymore, I doubted it, but I always answered sure; sure, I always said, I work out whenever I can.

He dipped his chin into his chest, smiled, saying, "Well, you know what they say? They say that hope is the sum and substance of all life."

"You're unusual," I told him. "You know that, don't you? You are exceptionally weird."

Before he became a cop, he did three years in Turkey with the air force and told me he never once lifted a woman's skirt. I asked him if there were whores in Turkey. He said not many, no, not a whole lot. It's a Muslim country and it's not too cool to fool with a Sunni Muslim woman. I said yeah, sure, but you were in the air force. Are you going to tell me you didn't find one sweetie? He told

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me he never looked for a whore. I said, you were there, what, two-three years? How'd you stay mellow and manageable? He said, I did meet a girl from a good family, she gave me a copy of the Koran. I said, yeah, but you were in the air force, being in the air force away from home I figured was dope, sex, and rock-'n'-roll. He said, the Turks put you in touch with your ancestors you pull that crap.

His stomach resembled a small rocky ladder. He did two hundred sit-ups and ran ten miles a day. He was in great shape, and he quoted Thoreau.

The police department was a place full of young and older men, and like any place where you go from here to there, assignment to assignment, partner to partner, he could have been just another buddy in a long series that walked with me and rode with me during the heated sticky days and chilly nights. Except he wasn't; his face, his manner, the way he moved and laughed are scorched into my memory. Not long ago, sitting in a police car in Jackson Square, New Orleans, I closed my eyes and I imagined him standing there watching me, his soft laugh in my head.

"I am not just any partner," he once told me. "You remember that. You know I can protect you and no partner you'll ever have can protect you the way I can."

Probably he was right. What partner would devote himself to my mental and physical well-being; probably none would dedicate himself the way he did to changing my view of things mystical and real. We were the same age, but he had a history, a long history of travel and enlightenment. I was a neighborhood guy full of illusions and innocence, he had seen Troy and Istanbul. He had this personal philosophy that the world was full of vermin and violence and evil-doing, and that some of us were destined to stand between the righteous and degenerate. I pretended to understand what he meant. With his fair skin and a face splashed wall-to-wall with those rust-colored freckles, sometimes I thought of him as charming. However, his face changed when he stared at the winos and junkies and people who called us for help; they were everywhere and he would listen to them.

So there we were in a sector car, two rookies three months out of the police academy. Me, I was the recorder, cap off, my head back, my arms spread across the top of the seat. He was behind the wheel driving, speed-rapping about sky diving, how it was the greatest kick ever.

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"A bird, you spin through the sky like a kind of hawk at one with your God and the cosmos." He almost screamed with glee.

I reached forward and played with the radio, turned up the squelch, and reminded him that we had missed lunch.

He lightly slapped my arm. "Come with me next weekend. You'll love it," he said with enthusiasm.

"I'd rather chew glass. Not next weekend, not ever."

"Just try it. Give it a shot. Live a little."

"Feathers, you see any feathers here? If God wanted me to fly, he'd have supplied me with feathers."

It was three in the afternoon, an hour to go, the voice on the radio came on and told us to check, see if an ambulance and oxygen were needed at a cottage near the beach. He glanced at me then he hit the siren and lights. Rookies, we used the siren and lights every chance we got.

This happened almost thirty years ago, and I still remember that day, the smell of the beach, the clapping of the waves, the sun coming straight down, scorching the street and sidewalk. It was mid July and we had spent the day driving along the boardwalk and through the Rockaway Beach streets where elderly Irish couples with little red veins in their faces set up housekeeping in dumpy cottages for the summer.

Because cops lived with the emotional baggage of men who might die doing their job, many carried good-luck pieces. A picture of the wife or girlfriend inside their cap, a tiny cross pinned here or there. He had his copy of the Koran the girl from Izmir had presented to him. The book was on the seat beside us.

"Hurry up, please hurry." A seventyish woman stood in the cottage doorway, throwing her arms out then pulling at her hair, jerking her head back and calling out, "Tom, Tom, Tommy." She had a flat-nosed, round face; gray, bundled hair, a whole lot massed on her head but as much sticking out at peculiar angles where she had yanked it.

I pushed past her into a dark kitchen lit only by a TV that squatted on the counter. The shades were drawn, and I couldn't hear any noise from the street. Tom's elbows were on the table, his chin rested on his fists. When I walked toward him he pitched forward, his face slamming onto the tabletop, making a horrible splat. I lifted him from under the armpits and laid him on the green linoleum floor. A scar ran the length of his cheek, dividing it. His eyes were closed more tightly than any eyes I had ever seen before. He was bare-

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chested and covered with tattoos. Over his right nipple was "Death," in the center of his chest "Before," over his left nipple "Dishonor." A Marine, my partner told me, Tommy's a Marine. Then he ran from the room, saying he'd call an ambulance with oxygen.

I saw clearly what was before me and told myself—no, shouted to myself—that I was probably seeing my first death, a fact that fascinated me, and I stored the moment, attempted to hold it as if I were gripping in my hands a bird, a wild bird which, if I didn't hold it just right, with perfection and poise, would struggle from my grip and fly off out over the sea and be gone forever. I didn't want this instant to be merely a memory, something to talk about in locker rooms and radio cars, then over the years fade and be lost to me. For a fraction of a second I focused on Tom, his silent and motionless tattooed chest, his eyes shut with pain and fear. Within that moment of time I wallowed in the luxury of thinking myself a distinguished healer. I pinched his nose, opened his mouth, removed dentures, and blew. I tell you now that I remember no taste, nothing. Only a sound, a deep hollow whispering from him. In that kitchen there was no air, and I sweated freely. I blew into his mouth and pounded his chest and felt movement from Tom and then a hand, my partner's hand, his lips next to my ear, his breath on my neck, his voice a soft, soft whisper. "I called for an ambulance, but I think it's too late." I shook him off and kept working. Harder, faster, until soon it seemed even to me that I had crawled to the very edge of madness. Two hands on my shoulders, yet I didn't turn, I was with Tom, he and I together fighting to keep him in this world. Then a voice, an unfamiliar voice talking to me with genuine concern and tenderness.

"Let me take over. I've oxygen here. You've done good, kid, all you can. Let me take over now."

My partner stood on the porch of the cottage smoothing out the page in his memorandum book. Emergency Service officers, the sergeant, and ambulance attendants were with Tom in his kitchen.

"You did real good in there . . . real good. All that could be expected and then some," he said.

"Sure," I said, "whatever."

The cottage door swung open and the Emergency Service officer stepped out. His name was Paul and he carried the oxygen tank in one hand and a clipboard in the other and said to me, "You know, the old guy was a DOA. What I'm trying to say," he said, "what I'm

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trying to tell you, rookie, is that you were blowing for a half-hour into the mouth of a dead man."

"Get in here," the sergeant called from inside the cottage.

We walked into the kitchen and could see that something was going on with the sergeant, he was on his knees, kneeling next to Tom. The pockets of Tom's slacks had been turned out. "One of you," he said, "go into the living room and sit with the wife. You," he said to me, "you get me some soap."

My partner looked over at me and permitted himself a cool half-smile and I got nervous because he seemed to know something, and I didn't know nearly so much as he did. There was a language that he and the sergeant understood, a language my partner picked up in Turkey, the same language the sergeant learned in the streets. Language is the key, I thought. Soon I would understand that this kind of language any idiot can learn.

I gave the sergeant the soap; we did not speak at all. The sergeant rubbed the soap onto Tom's fingers. There were rings there, two. I watched the sergeant rub soap around those rings and slide them from Tom's hand. He told me to make sure Tom's wife stayed in the living room because she would not grasp that part of his job, the job of sergeant, was to safeguard a DOA's valuables. The thing about that was, why couldn't he tell Tom's wife about the responsibilities of his job? Tom's wife, I figured, would understand. I realized what he was doing, and I looked past him over his shoulder at the TV on the counter. All I thought about was the way it was with us, me and Tom. I saw his face closed down, his eyes frozen shut like a pair of clams. The sergeant looked up and smiled at me a moment, waiting, I figured, for a sign from me, as if we were making some sort of an agreement. He turned from me to look at Tom then back to me again, his face now a question.

Later, I remember, sitting in our police cruiser staring out over the ocean, my partner tried to tell me again that the world was full of evil and violence and that some of us were destined to stand between the righteous and the evildoers.

I told him that I was so happy to be away from there, away from the cottage, away from the sergeant, away from Tom. I told my partner that I felt like a vulture by association and proxy. But how could I have stopped that sergeant. What was there for me to do? Zero, but to turn and run. He said that there are demons in this world and you can't run away from them. Demons, he said, must be

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faced head-on. If you don't face them, like a slow-moving virus they will obliterate all of your immunity.

"You know," I said then, "I really don't know what you're talking about."

"That sergeant," he said, "is a bad guy. Yet he is nothing compared to what can come crawling out of the woodwork in this here police department if you let it."

I told him I didn't have the stomach to stand up to that sort of shamelessness. "I'm not strong enough," I said.

He half laughed and waved me away, saying, "You'll learn; you will have to."

One night a few months later, after having his dinner, my partner came slowly out of a restaurant. A cop had stopped a car and was preparing to write a summons. (I had taken the night off.) The driver of the car was racing his engine. My partner walked to the driver's window, reached into that car to turn off the ignition key. The driver dropped the car into gear and sped off.

An athlete, a strong, hardy guy, my partner grabbed and held on to something inside the car and rode it. The driver didn't believe it, no one believed that he could ride that car at high speed down Pennsylvania Avenue. But he did. He rode it two, three blocks, the driver swerving, speeding, trying to throw him off. My partner's arms were hard and strong, much stronger than he looked. It was seven o'clock at night and many people watched from the sidewalk, saw the speeding car with the cop hanging on its side like some sort of circus stunt. The driver pulled that car into the path of an oncoming bus, slammed the side of the car off the bus. He crushed my partner.

His name was Jimmy, Jimmy Burns, and he died thirty years ago this month. Now and then, when I watch young cops toying with each other or when I'm just walking by the sea, I think about him, my first partner, the first cop I knew who died fighting demons. I try to remember exactly the things that happened to us, the things he said and did or what I remember of those things. I don't want to forget any of it. That is why I keep writing cop stories.

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a *NEW* Ben Snow story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

We pick up the saga of Ben Snow this month in the New Mexico territory, where the gunslinger encounters mysteries both sacred and profane. Unlike many of the author's other series, which began in EQMM, *the Snow adventures had their start in* The Saint Magazine *in 1961 and were designed specially to meet the needs of the magazine's editor, Hans Stefan Santesson. Snow has been with* EQMM *for only about a decade. . . .*

THE GRANITE GOD

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Ben Snow first heard mention of the Granite God when he was riding through southern New Mexico in the spring of 1897. It was the long line of Mexican peasants that attracted his attention, moving north from the border area with some goal obviously in mind. He reined up his horse Oats and asked one of the men, in Spanish, where they were headed.

"To see God," the man replied.

"Near here?"

"In the Fernando Valley, on a rock."

Ben nodded and waved his hand. "Go with God."

Most of the peasants were middle-aged, with more women than men, and as he sat watching them he wondered if he might ride along. He abandoned the idea almost immediately, though. A man named Colonel Faraway had hired him for a job, and he was expected in Las Cruces the following day.

Soon he had left the peasants behind, riding along the edge of the San Andres mountain range. Perhaps if he had gone then to see the Granite God, some things would have turned out differently.

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* * *

Colonel Faraway was a retired cavalry officer who'd fought Apaches in the glory days of Cochise and Geronimo. The colonel was nearing sixty now, with long white hair and a beard that made him look a bit like Buffalo Bill Cody. When Ben was ushered into his presence in a sitting room that seemed a bit too fancy, the colonel did not rise. He motioned toward his bandaged foot resting on a stool and muttered, "Gout."

"I'm sorry. I know it must be painful."

"Damned painful! I seem to get it every year or so. Sit down, sit down! I'm not your commanding officer."

Ben sat carefully on a red chair with fringe at the bottom and white doilies on the armrests. "The telegram said you wanted to hire me."

"Exactly. I want you to bring back our maid, Esmeralda. If it wasn't for this foot I'd go do it myself."

"Your maid?" Ben gave a little laugh. "I think there must be some mistake here. I've done ranch work and occasional guard duty, even some detective work on occasion. I don't bring back runaway maids."

"I heard you're fast with a gun." He studied Ben through half-closed eyes. "Fast as Billy the Kid used to be."

"Where is Esmeralda?"

"Gone to the mountains to see the Lord."

"What—?" Ben started to ask, and then remembered the pilgrimage he'd encountered. "Is this about the Granite God?"

"I'm not surprised you've heard of it. Half the territory seems to be talking about it. They were blasting away some rock near a silver mine up north and on this slab of granite, people swore the figure of God appeared—an old man with a white beard. At least that's what some people see. They're a superstitious lot down here, you know, especially the Mexicans. Always looking for miracles."

"Your maid Esmeralda—"

"Esmeralda Foso. I have a picture of her somewhere."

He produced a photograph of a plain-looking Mexican woman, apparently in her twenties, squinting into the sun. She wore a long apron over her dress and seemed to have just stepped outdoors from the kitchen. "Why do you need someone fast with a gun to bring her back?"

"Did I say that? I don't remember saying that."

"Maybe I jumped to that conclusion." Ben wasn't liking any of this. He especially wasn't liking Colonel Faraway.

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The colonel shifted in his chair, bringing forth a little buckskin bag with a drawstring top. He tossed it to Ben. "That's yours if you bring her back."

Ben glanced at the gold coins inside. "Maids must be hard to find out here."

"Hard enough. Do we have a deal?"

Ben emptied a few of the coins into his hand. "I'll take this for expenses, the rest if I find her. But I need to know more about Esmeralda. Is she very religious?"

"You know how they are. Every Sunday she's a saint. The rest of the week she's just a woman. Her work is good. My wife has trouble getting along without her."

"When did she leave?"

"A week ago, two days before I telegraphed you. I was pleased you could come so quickly."

"Did she go alone or with someone?"

"I don't know. She never went to town, but the priest from her mission church may be there too. It's a half-day's ride from here."

Ben Snow stood up. "All right. I'll ride up there and try to find her. I don't know what else I can do, though. I can't force her to come back here."

"Try," Colonel Faraway said, showing his yellowed teeth in a sort of grin. "You try."

There was no one to let Ben out, so he closed the door behind him and walked to the hitching post where Oats waited patiently. Then he heard a woman's voice softly call his name. "Mr. Snow! Over here, please!" It was the woman who'd let him in.

She was a tall, dignified-looking woman with gray hair in a bun at the back of her head. She wore eyeglasses and a long black dress which she held up a bit off the ground as she approached him. Ben knew that it must be the colonel's wife and he went to meet her.

"Mrs. Faraway?"

"Yes. I know you've seen my husband. He wants you to find Esmeralda and bring her back, doesn't he?"

"The colonel sent a telegram to a ranch in Colorado where I'd spent the winter. He offered a job, but I didn't learn what it was till today. Frankly, it's a bit out of my line."

"Did he tell you why he needs her back?"

"He says you can't get along without her."

"That's true. She works her fingers to the bone cooking and cleaning. I'm helpless since she's gone."

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"I took some money and promised to look for her at this pilgrimage up north."

"She's very good to him as well as me. He may have other reasons for wanting her back. Sometimes I think she may have gone up there to atone for her sins."

"Thank you, Mrs. Faraway. I'll do what I can."

Only once did Ben have to ask directions. Presently he picked up the trail of the pilgrims, moving north along the Rio Grande. It had been a dry spring and the river was so low children were playing in it. After a half-day's ride, he caught sight of a large encampment a few miles ahead. As he approached a man wearing the black cassock of a mission padre came forward to greet him.

"Welcome, my son. I am Father Blue of the Mission of the Rio Grande. Have you come to view the God in granite?"

"I have, Padre."

He was a tall, slender man who seemed in good physical shape. Despite his reference to Ben as "my son," they seemed about the same age, in their late thirties. Something about his manner reminded Ben of an older mission priest he'd encountered some five years earlier in Arizona, supplying horses to Mexican revolutionaries.*

"We have more than seven hundred people camped here," the priest explained. "Some come and go, but others wait. They expect a miracle, I think, as at Lourdes and Guadalupe."

"Do you expect one?" Ben Snow asked, dismounting from his horse.

"Not at all. It is a mark of their faith that the shapes of blasted rock take on the appearance of the Lord, but they are only shapes. Some people come to peer at the granite slab and they see nothing."

"I will keep an open mind," Ben promised. "One other thing, Padre, might you have noticed this woman in the encampment?" He took out the picture the colonel had given him.

Father Blue studied it, then said with only the slightest hesitation, "I may have seen her, both here and at my mission, but she has never spoken with me. Do you know her?"

"She is a friend of my brother's. Her name is Esmeralda."

"Emerald," the priest said. "It means emerald."

"Why does that bother you?"

*See "Horse Thief Haven" (*EQMM,* December, 1994).

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Father Blue shrugged. "Only that she wears a large sapphire ring on one finger. One would have thought she would wear an emerald."

Ben smiled. "My name is Snow but I do not yet have white hair. Your name is Blue yet you dress all in black."

"Of course!" the priest agreed. "It was a foolish thought on my part. Look for her by the bend in the river."

Ben remounted his horse and rode on. It was not long before he came upon the focus of all the attention. Hundreds of pilgrims prayed silently on their knees before a towering shaft of granite, its scarred surface bearing signs of recent damage. The work of the dynamite could be seen in the mass of rock chips scattered over the ground. Ben's first thought was that some of the worshipers must be kneeling on the sharp stones, but if this was the case, they showed no sign of it. In some places they were pressed shoulder to shoulder, their faces transfixed by what they saw.

For Ben the sight of the blasted granite was less than awe-inspiring. As Father Blue had warned him, it was all in the eye of the beholder. By stretching his imagination to its limits he could discern a shape like a head, but going from there to God's head was a leap he was unable to make.

"Do you see it?" he asked a rugged cowboy standing nearby.

"I see something," the man replied. "But I don't know what. If so many people believe, who am I to doubt them?"

Ben introduced himself and the man said his name was Ramon Marcus. He had come to work in the silver mines, but the owners had been forced by the crowd to shut down the nearby mine shaft. Ben took out the picture of Esmeralda and showed it to him. "Have you seen this young woman in the crowd?"

Ramon Marcus did not hesitate as the priest had done. "She's right over there," he said, pointing toward the edge of the kneeling crowd, about halfway back.

Then Ben saw her, looking exactly like her picture. Her eyes were closed and she seemed wedged between two large women near the end of the row. Even as he watched, one of the women shifted her position and Esmeralda fell limply forward. Someone screamed as Ben rushed forward.

"She's fainted!" a woman at her side shouted. "Help me get her out of this crowd."

But as they moved away to give the poor woman air, it was obvious that she hadn't merely fainted. A thin trail of blood ran down the side of her peasant dress from a rent in the fabric. She'd been

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stabbed, and Ben Snow already knew she was dead.

Ramon Marcus, the man to whom Ben had spoken, immediately went off to summon the local sheriff, who was somewhere on the scene. The frightened women who'd been kneeling next to the dead woman could barely speak, and it was only the arrival of Father Blue that seemed finally to calm them. He acted as a translator, helping Ben to grasp the rapid Spanish spoken by the excited women. They seemed to remember a slender man with a pale face kneeling behind the dead woman for a time and then moving away, but no one could be certain. Their eyes had been focused on the great sight of God in granite.

The sheriff was a man named Reedy with a handlebar moustache and a waist so thin it barely held up his gunbelt. He didn't want to hear anything about a murder. "Maybe she stabbed herself," he speculated. "She got so carried away by all the praying that she had a spell and stabbed herself. I got enough to worry about here without some dead Mexican woman."

"She's from down in Las Cruces," Ben Snow explained. "Worked as a maid and cook for a couple there. She was intensely religious and came here to see the Granite God. They wanted her back. They gave me a picture and sent me to find her." He knelt to touch the soft flesh of her hands and face. "If she killed herself, where's the knife?"

"Maybe you killed her. You're the only one who admits knowing her." He unrolled a blanket from the back of his horse and laid it over the body.

"I didn't know her," Ben corrected. "I'd never met her. I was sent to find her and persuade her to come back."

"What are these people's names? I'll have to notify them. They may want to claim the body or tell her relatives."

"Colonel and Mrs. Faraway. A telegram to that name in Las Cruces should reach them."

Ramon Marcus had been standing nearby and now he broke into the conversation. "Is that Colonel Faraway, the Indian fighter?"

"I believe it is."

"I fought with him when I was nineteen, against Geronimo. He was a great officer."

"He's getting old now, got a bit of the gout."

"Sorry to hear that."

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Word of the killing had spread among the pilgrims and dampened the spiritual nature of the occasion. Some wondered how the Lord could have allowed a murder at such a holy place. Father Blue was busy answering their questions and trying to reassure them. Ben's attention was especially taken by a red-haired woman who rode a black horse. She was neither peasant nor pilgrim and he wondered what she was doing there. As she rode away from the priest he followed on Oats until he caught up with her just outside the encampment.

"I saw you back there," he said. "Did you come to worship?"

"Hardly! This is my family's land. I've been trying for weeks to move the people off of it. That priest is no help."

"They come because they see God on the face of that blasted rock."

"If it is such a holy place, why do they kill one another?"

"Have there been other killings?" Ben asked.

"No," she admitted, tossing her mane of red hair. She was attractive in a wild, untamed way. "But these people don't belong here." As if suddenly realizing she had lumped him in with the others, she asked, "Who are you?"

"Ben Snow. I came to find the dead woman."

"I'm Kathy Sorret." She shook hands. "Are you a sheriff or something? Did you want to arrest her?"

"No, nothing like that. She worked for a married couple down in Las Cruces and they wanted her back."

"You found her."

"Not quickly enough, I'm afraid. Now I have to wait for them to come up and identify the body."

She nodded, then turned her horse and rode off.

It was the middle of the next day before Colonel Faraway and his wife arrived, driving a fancy buckboard wagon. His bandaged foot was propped on a little barrel and Mrs. Faraway held the reins. "Where is she?" he asked Ben immediately. His wife, wearing a plaid shirt, pants, and riding boots, helped him down.

Ben gave him a hand. "Careful, now. A local doctor has the body, but they're anxious to get it buried. The weather's getting warmer."

"Are you certain it's her?" Mrs. Faraway asked.

"She looks like her picture."

Ben escorted them to a nearby tent where the body was being kept out of the sun. Dr. Abbot, who worked for the government on the nearby Apache reservation, pulled back the blanket so they

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could see the face. Mrs. Faraway gasped, and the colonel confirmed the identification. "Yes, that's Esmeralda."

The doctor handed him a sapphire ring. "She was wearing this. It looks valuable. If she had a family, they might want it."

"There was no family," Mrs. Faraway said. "We were the closest thing to a family."

"Do you want to take her back for burial?"

The colonel waved his hand. "You've waited so long already—better get her into the ground here, near the God she came to pray to. Isn't that best, Grace?"

His wife nodded.

"There's one other thing." The doctor sounded almost apologetic. "If you need money—"

"No, no. I just wanted to tell you, Esmeralda was about three months pregnant when she died."

The murdered woman was buried that evening, after the heat of the day had passed, in the little valley before the granite slab where some saw the likeness of God. Word of the burial had spread throughout the gathered crowd, and they came with flaming torches to plant in the earth like candles in a church, until the whole of the valley took on the appearance of a giant cathedral without walls for Father Blue's brief service.

Ben watched from a distance, listening to the hymns they sang. When it was over, he strolled off with Ramon Marcus, who'd been watching nearby. "The colonel seemed really moved by the service," Marcus said.

"Was he a good leader then?" Ben asked.

"Against the Indians he was the best. He was all man. He killed their braves and loved their women."

"You mean he raped—"

"Nothing like that. It was just that he liked Indian and Mexican women. Some men do. Everyone under his command knew it."

"Think he's still like that?" Ben asked, remembering the pregnant maid.

Marcus shrugged. "It was eleven years ago. Who knows?"

One person would know, Ben decided. Colonel Faraway's wife.

He found her at the edge of the assemblage, watching the ceremony with dry eyes. "It must be a sad time for you, Mrs. Faraway. You told me you depended a great deal upon Esmeralda."

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"She was a hard worker," the woman agreed. "I don't know what I'll do without her."

"Had you known she was pregnant?"

"I—no, I hadn't."

"Your place is pretty remote. Did she have a lover in town?"

"We knew nothing of her personal life."

"Men have been known to kill women when an unexpected pregnancy might threaten them."

"Threaten? I have no idea what you mean."

The hymns died out and the funeral service, such as it was, ended. The torches still burned for a time, until they too gradually died. Ben rode over to the buckboard where Colonel Faraway still waited. "A nice service," he said. "Father Blue did well on such short notice." He reached into his pocket for some gold coins. "These should cover your time, Mr. Snow."

"You've already paid me more than enough. I didn't bring her back, after all."

"That's not your fault."

Ben wasn't going to argue with him. He pocketed the coins and touched the brim of his hat as he rode on, but as he neared the edge of the camp he saw Sheriff Reedy conversing with the red-haired woman, Kathy Sorret. Ben was not a lawman, and avenging the death of Esmeralda Foso was far from his thoughts. Still, he hated being played for a sucker. He rode up to the sheriff and said, "You might want to have the doctor examine Colonel Faraway's bandaged foot before he starts back home in the morning. His gout may have shown remarkable improvement."

The sheriff grunted. "I'll do that. Thanks for the suggestion."

The Sorret woman trailed along behind Ben as he rode off. "What was that all about?"

"Colonel Faraway hired me to find his maid. I found her just after she'd been murdered in this crowd. She was pregnant, but he told me she never went into town, only to a mission church. He couldn't have ridden here ahead of me in that buckboard, but he might have on horseback, in disguise. I just want to make sure that bandage isn't a fake."

"Why are you so suspicious?"

"Because he gave me too much money for doing nothing. Tell me, is your ranch anywhere near the Faraway place?"

"About ten miles. I heard he was living there with his wife and a maid but I never saw them. He only moved in about six months ago and they kept pretty much to themselves."

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"I'll stay till morning," Ben told her, "just to see if I'm right about that foot."

It was Mrs. Faraway who accosted him early the following morning as he was rolling up his sleeping bag. "Was it your idea to have the doctor examine my husband's foot?" she asked. Standing close to him, she was a tall and formidable woman.

"I thought we should remove all doubts," he admitted. "What did Dr. Abbot find?"

"A bad case of the gout, just as the colonel said. Does that satisfy you?"

"It puts my mind at ease, and it lifts any suspicion from him. You should be pleased."

"When will you be leaving here?"

"Very soon, Mrs. Faraway. There's nothing to keep me."

"Let us walk a bit, up toward the God-figure."

Father Blue was saying a Mass for the people who had spent the night at the site. Some were eating breakfast over campfires and preparing to depart. Still others could be seen in the distance, just arriving. It was a town whose inhabitants changed daily, all come to see the miraculous image of the Lord on the side of a mountain.

"I want to get closer," Mrs. Faraway said as they reached a spot just below the granite figure. She was wearing pants again, with a shirt and riding boots, and seemed quite capable of making the climb without assistance. Still, Ben took her callused hand to steady her as she went over the first ridge of blasted rock.

From here they could see that the dynamite had split the granite lengthwise, blasting away an exterior covering and partially removing another layer from its solid foundation. It was this partial layer, still attached at the bottom, which had split in such a way as to create a silhouette of a bearded old man against the background of solid granite. This seeming "portrait" was no more than a couple of inches thick.

"A trick of nature," Ben told her, examining it closely.

"But something caused it."

"A stick of dynamite and the imaginations of all those people down there."

Father Blue had finished his Mass and come up to join them. "It's nothing startling," he agreed. "I examined it the first day. A good storm or just a winter freeze could crumble this image overnight."

"But until then—"

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"Until then people will believe what they want to believe. I state the Church's position every time I say Mass here."

"Is there anything here that might have caused someone to stab Esmeralda Foso?"

"Only the evil in men's minds," the slender priest replied. "Perhaps she slighted someone, or turned aside an improper advance."

"What sort of woman was she?" Ben asked Mrs. Faraway as they descended the hill.

"Hardworking, very religious. But you know that already. She'd been with us about a year, since before we moved to this area of the New Mexico Territory."

"When we first met, you hinted that the colonel might have a special reason for wanting her back. Is it possible that she was carrying his child?"

"If she was, I'd have had reason to kill her myself."

"Did you?" Ben asked.

"The sheriff has already questioned us. My husband and I were never out of each other's sight. Come see us before you leave."

Whatever had happened there the previous morning no longer concerned Ben. He'd been wrong about the colonel's gout and it was time to move on. But once again he found it difficult to mount his horse and ride away. The crowd had begun singing a new hymn, their voices swelling to fill the valley, and the spectacle of it was overwhelming. Some of the peasant women walked up to the rocks below the granite slab, leaving little bouquets of cactus flowers as an offering. Others brought handmade wooden crosses.

Ben finally turned away, leading Oats toward the trail. This time it was Sheriff Reedy who stopped him. "I had the doc examine Colonel Faraway's foot like you suggested. He's got the gout, all right."

"His wife told me."

"Any other ideas?"

"Motive, Sheriff. Find the motive and you'll probably find your killer."

"The women nearby think it was a slim man kneeling behind her. It could have been her lover."

"Possibly."

"You saw no one?"

"I barely noticed Esmeralda before we realized she was dead."

"Father Blue is leaving this afternoon. Says he has to get back to his mission church for Sunday services. He'll hold one more prayer service before his departure."

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"Some of the others may leave when he goes," Ben suggested.

"I doubt it. They view this as some sort of miracle, whether the Church approves or not."

Ben remembered that Mrs. Faraway had suggested he see them before he left. He mounted his horse and headed over toward the buckboard. The colonel sat up on a keg, his bandaged foot out straight in front of him. Mrs. Faraway was fixing breakfast over the campfire, frying some eggs in an iron spider with short legs.

"Do you wish to join us, Mr. Snow?" she asked.

He realized suddenly that he'd eaten no breakfast. "It would be a pleasure."

"I bought the eggs from a Mexican woman. The colonel likes a sturdy meal in the morning but we're a bit limited out here." She made coffee too, and passed him a cup.

"You do very well," he told her. He saw the sheriff a short distance off, heading their way. "That surprises me, because you told me the day we met that you never cooked at all."

"Breakfast hardly counts," she replied, and Ben saw the colonel reaching for something behind him.

"It counts enough to convict you of murder," Ben said quietly. "Both of you."

Colonel Faraway was raising his army pistol when Ben hurled the cup of coffee at his face. He screamed as the shot went wild and Sheriff Reedy leaped from his horse. "What's happening?" he yelled.

"They killed Esmeralda. Stop her!"

But Mrs. Faraway was too quick for them. She leaped over the bedrolls and took off running, heading for the granite slab at the front of the camp. Reedy was busy disarming the colonel so Ben went after her. Weaving in and out of the peasants who scattered before them, he knew he couldn't draw his gun. She was fast in her boots and pants and he saw she aimed on escaping over the granite wall to the foothills behind it where pursuit on horseback would be difficult.

"Come back!" he shouted. "Stop!"

But she kept on running. Off to the side he could see Father Blue joining in the chase, along with some of the others. Now she'd reached the granite slab, and she started to climb it, using the jagged edge of the damaged piece to pull herself up.

"Come down! It won't hold you!" he called out, remembering his previous inspection. Already she was clambering over the silhouette of the old man's head.

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Sheriff Reedy ran up, his gun drawn. "Should I try to wing her?"

"No!" Ben put his hand on the weapon, forcing it down.

Then they heard a terrible crack like thunder, and the Lord's head gave way under her weight. The thin sheet of granite broke free. She fell with a scream, and none of them could look.

They went back to where Colonel Faraway waited, lying in the dust, holding his scalded face. It was Dr. Abbot who told him. "She's dead, Colonel. I'm sorry."

"I saw it," he said. "She was a foolish woman. This was all her idea."

Ben Snow knelt on the ground next to him. "Esmeralda Foso was your wife, wasn't she? The woman who just died was your cook and maid."

"Yes," the colonel replied, almost in a whisper. "She was Grace, my Grace. How did you know?"

"The sapphire Esmeralda wore was much too grand for a maid and cook. The so-called Mrs. Faraway told me Esmeralda did all the cooking and cleaning, that she was helpless without her. Yet she was skillful enough in preparing breakfast just now. More important, the supposedly hard-working Esmeralda had soft hands while Grace's hands were callused. Ramon Marcus knew you in the Indian wars and told me you had a liking for Indian and Mexican women. So you married a young Mexican woman. Then you hired yourselves a middle-aged American woman as a maid and cook. Since you lived away from everyone, some people who didn't know you jumped to the conclusion that the middle-aged woman was your wife and the young Mexican woman was your maid. When you and Grace began a love affair, you knew the deeply religious Esmeralda would never agree to a divorce, especially after she became pregnant. You and Grace plotted to kill her, and when she came up here to see God in a slab of granite you saw the perfect opportunity. You hired me to bring her back, fortifying the idea that she was your maid rather than your wife. Then Grace got here ahead of me and found her before I could. She was tall and slender, and with a hat over her hair she could pass for a man. After the murder, she returned home to wait for the summons you knew would come."

"Why go to all this trouble?" Sheriff Reedy asked. "Why did he bother to pass his wife off as his maid?"

"Because he knew the killing of a pregnant Mexican maid would attract far less attention and investigation than the killing of a retired colonel's wife."

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Father Blue came to join them. "I have given the American woman the last rites of the Church. That is all I could do."

Suddenly Ben was aware that people were leaving, packing their meager belongings and starting back down the trail. "Where are they going?" he asked the priest.

"Home, or in search of the next miracle. There is nothing here for them any longer."

Ben stared up at the shapeless slab of granite. If the figure of God had been there for them once, it was present no longer.

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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

Along with the other achievements of its more than half century of existence, this magazine has presented the short-story debuts of a number of detectives who went on to gain prominence in book-length cases. Ross Macdonald's Lew Archer, who would be the most famous of the lot, *almost* qualifies—although the short story "Find the Woman" (*EQMM* June 1946) has been reprinted as an Archer tale, both the original byline (Kenneth Millar) and character name (Rogers) were different. More definite instances include James Yaffe's Mom (June 1952), Joe Gores's Daniel Kearny Associates (December 1967), Robert L. Fish's (writing as Robert L. Pike) Lieutenant Clancy (December 1961), who later became the movies' Bullitt; Hugh Pentecost's John Jericho (November 1964); and Francis M. Nevins, Jr.'s Loren Mensing (September 1972). I have no doubt there are others. A more recent member of the club is Thomas Adcock's Irish-American New York cop Neil Hockaday, whose adventures you can hardly read without taking on a brogue. Hockaday's first book-length case was the 1991 paperback Edgar winner *Dark Maze,* but he has been entertaining *EQMM* readers since "Christmas Cop" (March 1986).

*** Thomas Adcock: *Devil's Heaven,* Pocket Books, $20. Now married, albeit in a non-official Irish tinker wedding, to longtime girlfriend Ruby Flagg, Hockaday returns to New York, where his drinking problem leads first to his removal from the streets and into an office job, then to a stay in a dryout clinic called the Straight and Narrow. On release, he turns private eye while awaiting department reinstatement, looking into the death of a partner in the advertising firm Ruby has recently rejoined and a series of murders of prominent homosexuals. As *EQMM* readers know, Adcock is a unique mystery voice, giving an extra shot of color, energy, and not-quite-over-the-top gusto to all the elements of the story: style, characters, setting, and even the puzzle plot. Newly reprinted is an even better Hockaday novel, 1994's *Drown All the Dogs* (Pocket Books, $5.50), which describes the New York detective's traumatic search for his Irish roots; it's a big, full-bodied narrative, the author's proclivity for soaring language and stagey climactic bloodlettings giving it an almost Shakespearean feel.

*** E. J. Gorman: *The Marilyn Tapes,* Forge, $22.95. Before her death, Marilyn Monroe made some frank tape recordings about her life, including her relationship

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with the Kennedy brothers, for columnist Louella Parsons. After her death, Louella, J.F.K., and J. Edgar Hoover all have compelling motives to get the tapes. This fast-moving page-turner tells its story in short, crisp scenes, alternating the viewpoints of more than a dozen characters. Though there are some fictional figures among them, the ones drawn from life are of the greatest interest: The posthumous Marilyn herself is the most sympathetic, while the depiction of Hoover and his long-time friend and FBI lieutenant Clyde Tolson manages to be both revealing and ambiguous.

*** W.W. Lee: *Cannon's Revenge,* Walker, $19.95. Old West sleuth Jefferson Birch returns, trying to track down a little girl stolen from her parents in the town of Deadwood, Colorado. The missing child's father edits the local newspaper, and the probable kidnapper is the vengeful father of man who was hanged for murder partly as a result of the editor's efforts. Halfway between a traditional western and a semi-inverted detective story, the novel moves along briskly, packing plenty of incident and period detail into its brief 130-page length.

** James R. McCahery: *What Evil Lurks,* Kensington, $16.95. Former radio actress Lavina London, an elderly sleuth in the Jessica Fletcher tradition, returns to solve the murder of a soap opera creator turned blackmailer, with several old friends and colleagues as suspects. The prose and dialogue are smooth, the whodunit plot carefully crafted, and the central character well developed and likeable. On the minus side, the leisurely-paced novel is at least twice its ideal length, and there is less old radio lore to fill the pages than I had hoped for.

Among the notable reprints are a pair from Carroll & Graf, a publishing firm determined to keep the classics of formal detection alive: Christianna Brand's 1953 puzzler, *Fog of Doubt* ($4.95), and Anthony Boucher's 1940 Sherlockian comedy, *The Case of the Baker Street Irregulars* ($4.95), the latter with an introduction by Otto Penzler. Foul Play/Countryman has reissued two prime Robert Barnard novels ($6 each) in his witty and satirical vein: *A Little Local Murder* (1983), about the making of a radio documentary on the village of Twytching, and *Political Suicide* (1986), about the drowning death of a Tory MP and the subsequent by-election.

For a true crime book with the same kind of fascination as a Golden Age whodunit, try Noel Behn's 1993 Edgar nominee, *Lindbergh: The Crime* (Onyx, $5.99). Like most recent writers on the case, Behn believes Bruno Hauptmann, executed in 1936 for the 1932 kidnapping and murder of Charles and Anne Lindbergh's infant son, was not guilty of the crime. From the outset, he suggests Lindbergh invented a fictitious kidnapping to cover up the real crime, and in an astonishing final section he points the finger at a possible murderer. Though Behn

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admits from the start "the case for this book's premise [is] relatively meager," he argues it persuasively.

A recent anthology of Valentine's Day mysteries, *Crimes of the Heart* (Berkley, $9), edited by Carolyn G. Hart (no pun apparently intended), boasts an all-star lineup of mostly female contributors —Sharyn McCrumb, Dorothy Cannell, Joan Hess, and Nancy Pickard among them, with Jeffery Wilds Deaver the token male. A couple of my favorite contemporary sleuths are in excellent form in rare short story appearances, both looking into lesser crimes than the usual murder: Susan Dunlap's Berkeley cop Jill Smith uncovers what must be a unique burglary ring in "A Contest Fit for a Queen," while Margaret Maron's Deborah Knott takes a humorous look at wedding party fashions and figures out who stole a valuable engagement ring in "With This Ring." Editor Hart doesn't let the gentle amorous holiday keep her from challenging "Henrie O" Collins to solve the multiple murder by fire of a family, while simultaneously directing the course of true love, in "Out of the Ashes." The volume, of course, shares its title with a Pulitzer Prize-winning play by Beth Henley. How many other titles of stage classics would work well for criminous theme anthologies? *Death of a Salesman* might be intriguing, or, for the cozier reader, *Murder in the Cathedral.*

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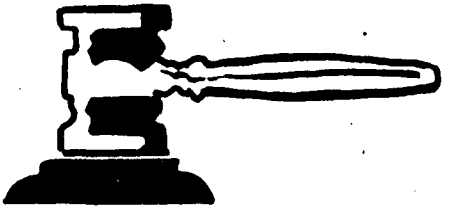

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Mary Reed and Eric Mayer of Rochester, New York, have chosen a truly original setting for the series of mystery short stories the following piece kicks off. Present-day Mongolia, like other former Soviet republics, has undergone its share of change since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, but that proved no deterrent to the ambitious authors once they'd conceived Dorj, their Mongolian police inspector. Dorj laments having been sent to an outpost of the Gobi desert, but finds his powers of deduction as acute as ever when a murderer crosses his path on the shifting sands . . .

THE *OBO* MYSTERY

by MARY REED and ERIC MAYER

Despite the *ger*'s cramped quarters, only Investigator Dorj, seated across the smoky fire from the two Russian archaeologists, noticed Rudenko slip a sheep's eye into the dirt next to his knee.

But then again, young Tikhanov had avoided looking at his older colleague for most of the meal—some sort of professional falling out perhaps. Their Mongolian host, Samga, was preoccupied with fishing a mercifully unidentifiable bit of boiled viscera from the pot suspended over the fire. Samga's wife lurked in the shadows beyond the fire, muttering to herself in a monotonous singsong, the result, Dorj deduced, of the *arki* that had once filled the empty bottles lined up on the painted chest next to the gray felt curve of the wall. She'd met them at the door upon their arrival, looked at them as if they were the mounted bandits that had reportedly been roaming this godforsaken fringe of the Gobi, and backed away in apparent terror.

So it was left to Dorj to note Rudenko's inhospitable sleight of hand with the sheep's eye. How like a foreigner. He thrust his own fork through the steam that kept clouding the round lenses of his spectacles. He came up with what appeared in the fitful light to be nothing worse than a gobbet of fat. It slid into his mouth and he chewed, failing to catch a drop of grease that ran down his sharp chin and onto the shiny lapel of his gray, worn jacket. At least the

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food distracted him from the company. He hoped he could locate the bandits soon. Then he could stop spending every spare hour guarding the foreigners.

"But what I want to know," Rudenko asked Samga, not for the first time, "is where this bone might have come from."

Again, he displayed the foot-long black rock he insisted was a fossilized piece of something called a tarbosaur. "I know that people throw offerings onto the *obo* mounds, but would someone have made a point to carry something to the *obo* from a distance, or do they just use whatever's at hand?" He had been drinking all evening. His heavy Slavic features were reddened and his voice was becoming increasingly loud.

Samga seemed just as disinclined to discuss the source of the dinosaur bone Rudenko had dug out of the *obo* mound as he had been to answer Investigator Dorj's questions about unfamiliar horsemen. His narrow eyes peered out from a flat sunburned face as impassive as the moon rising over the massifs. He might have been of a different race than the sharp-featured inspector, except that they shared the same narrow, wary eyes. He grunted and wiped his greasy fingers on the long, high-collared *del* that had once been brightly colored. No wonder the old yak herder's a stoic, thought Dorj. With a wife as fond of the bottle as Magsa, he'd have to be.

"Can't we discuss something else," suggested Tikhanov. "That bone might have been tossed there hundreds of years ago. One of the Khan's army might have tossed it there."

"So what?" said Rudenko. "If he picked it up near the *obo,* that's where the site should've been. Nearer the red sandstone outcroppings. I told you from the beginning you chose the wrong location to dig."

"If the Science Academy is ever stupid enough to put you in charge of a dig you can pick the site." The fair-haired Tikhanov looked younger than his colleague. Dorj wondered if that was part of the problem between them.

Rudenko muttered something very brief that Dorj, with his limited linguistic skill, couldn't translate. The Russian thrust the bone through his belt, picked up a copper bowl of *airag* from the packed dirt floor, and took another gulp.

"You've had too much to drink," said Tikhanov.

Another indecipherable outburst. Rudenko's hand shook and some of the fermented mare's milk sloshed over the rim of the bowl as he lifted it to his lips again.

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For a moment Dorj's policeman's instinct sensed the potential for violence. Then it was gone, and he looked away from the arguing men. The somber walls of the *ger,* that traditional tentlike structure favored by Mongolian nomads for thousands of years, were decorated with a few embroidered hangings depicting horses, and what looked like a decaying, feathered headdress hung from a hook. It was a spartan place. Samga had only recently moved his few mangy yaks and sheep down from the steppes. Maybe he had not had time to unpack.

A photo, sitting on the painted chest next to the empty *arki* bottles, caught Dorj's eye and he felt the familiar pang in his chest.

A young man in uniform, barely recognizable as Samga, posed stiffly in front of the statue of the Great Liberator Sukhe Bator. All the nomads had one—themselves or a relative—the common memento of service to their country or a long-ago trip to Ulan Bator. Once, Dorj had passed the monument on his way to the Ministry of Public Security every morning. The photo was a constant, painful reminder of his old life. To some, the recent political upheaval meant a triumph for democratic values. To Dorj, it meant a transfer to the administrative center at Gurvan Tes. He longed for civilization, Communist or otherwise.

"*Obos* are very holy places."

The slurred voice, coming abruptly from behind him, startled Dorj.

It was Samga's wife.

"Very holy," she repeated, for no reason Dorj could ascertain. Then, more loudly, "Very holy." She moved backwards in a sort of odd stumbling motion and banged up against the painted chest. Obviously drunk, thought Dorj. Her eyes gleamed in the firelight.

Dorj sighed. As a schoolboy he'd learned about Mongolia's proud heritage, about the nomads living in harmony with nature, packing and moving their *gers* with the seasons, raising their yaks and sheep and horses, close to what little soil they could find on the verge of the desert—albeit eager to embrace agricultural collectivism. But behind the felt walls of the *gers* he saw the same sordid domestic turmoil, the same drunkenness and violence, as he saw behind the thin plaster walls of the city apartment blocks. The only difference was that in Ulan Bator he had been able to go to the State Theater at night.

"I think it's time to leave," he said.

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"Fine with me," agreed Tikhanov. The younger Russian was already on his feet.

Rudenko started to rise too, made it about six inches off the ground, and collapsed back down, apparently unconscious.

"Maybe your friend should sleep it off," Dorj suggested to Tikhanov. "Do you mind?" he asked Samga.

The old Mongolian's features registered all the emotion of the empty wastes outside the *ger*. He shrugged.

Dorj retrieved his shoes from the pile beside the entrance where they'd been left. An odd courtesy, considering the floor was the dirt of the desert. But it was necessary to learn the ways of his new, uncomfortable world.

"Keep him here," he told Samga. "I don't know if those bandits are in the area. Probably just some local horsemen raising hell. But there's no need to take chances."

Outside, a bitter wind scoured the lifeless plain that stretched off toward low, purple massifs, still dimly visible against the pale memory of sunset. Stiff from sitting on the ground, Dorj climbed slowly into the ancient *Zil* truck that had brought them here.

Tikhanov paused beside the truck. "You go back, Inspector. I suppose I'd better stay with Rudenko," he said, without much enthusiasm.

Dorj could barely make out the lights of the Russian archaeological site in the distance. It was farther than it looked. He should stay too, of course, to keep an eye on the foreigners. But he supposed Samga was capable enough, if taciturn. And the camp was nearby. He made a swift decision.

"Don't get any ideas about walking back," he warned. "I'll be back in the morning." Even as he said it, he knew he was neglecting his duty. But he was fed up chaperoning these Russians. What sort of job was that for a policeman? The engine started on the third try and he drove off.

He was obviously dead, sprawled face down on the ground, about three hundred meters from the *ger*. The pool of blood under his head glistened in the hard, slanting rays of the morning sun. Indisputably, he had been killed on the spot.

"Shot through the back of the head," muttered Dorj. "Judging from the angle, from above."

"A man on horseback could have done it," said Tikhanov. The Russian had come within two feet of the body and stopped. Now he

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paced, never coming any nearer, as if held back by an invisible line in the dirt. Ironic that an archaeologist would be squeamish about a body, Dorj thought, but merely agreed. "Yes. It might have been a horseman. One of the bandits."

He stood up stiffly—he was still unused to the hard cots in the camp—and a brisk wind hit his face, a wind which had wiped the desert surface clean. Dorj adjusted his spectacles, as if doing so might help him to see something more. There was no sign of hoof marks or tire tracks. He could see Samga's *ger* in the distance and his few yaks browsing beyond. His erstwhile host and his wife were standing a few yards away, stone-faced.

"A man seated in a vehicle—a truck at least—could have shot him from the same angle."

"I was sure he was out for the night," said Tikhanov. "After you left I—I got restless. I should have stayed."

Dorj thought the archaeologist's gaze flicked momentarily toward Magsa. He could imagine the drunken, incoherent woman might have made the night's stay an unpleasant prospect. This morning she seemed sober, though she still hung in back of her husband like a shadow on the wrong side of the sun. She had put on the feathered headdress he had noticed hanging from the wall of the *ger* the previous evening. Perhaps she was trying to make a better impression.

"He did leave the *ger,* as he says?" Dorj asked Samga.

Unlike his wife, Samga had not dressed for the occasion. His long robe and baggy trousers were those he'd worn the night before. He seemed to consider the question for a long time, or maybe it was merely his usual measured way of responding. "Not long after you."

"Rudenko was still sleeping when Tikhanov left?"

"Yes."

"Did you watch Tikhanov leave, then? Did you see him head back toward the camp?"

The nomad shook his head. "My wife was . . . distracted."

Although the archaeologist spoke little Mongolian he apparently deduced the direction of Dorj's questions."Don't you believe me? Do you think I came back to the camp, took the truck back to the *ger,* then came back to the camp again for you? Or do you think I waited outside the *ger* for him?" He looked startled, realizing he might have handed the investigator a viable theory. "Well . . . if I had I wouldn't have suggested it to you, would I?" He walked halfway around the body, carefully maintaining his distance.

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"I tossed and turned all night," said Dorj. "Something kept me awake, or woke me." Had it been the lumpy cot, or his conscience, or the sound of the *Zil* leaving and returning? But if he had been awake so often wouldn't he have remembered hearing the truck?

All he knew for certain was that when at sunrise, after he climbed painfully from the cot, he made his way out through the frost-stiffened flaps of his tent, he'd found Tikhanov pacing near the *Zil*. When the archaeologist explained how and why he'd left his colleague alone at the *ger*, his eyes never met Dorj's.

"He should be back by now," Tikhanov had concluded.

"Not if he's still sleeping off his drunk," said Dorj.

"Rudenko's an . . . experienced drinker."

Again they'd climbed into the cab of the *Zil* and headed toward Samga's *ger*. Tire tracks from their previous visit were no longer visible, and Dorj attempted to drive along what was left of a faint rut—the remains of a road, or a seasonal stream. Near the camp a few patches of thorny saksul broke the monotony, but that soon vanished. It seemed to take longer to spot the *ger* than it had the previous day, when he'd been more rested. Dorj scanned the horizon for landmarks through the streaked windshield.

"Over to the right? Isn't that the *obo* where you found the bone?"

The irregular pile of stones and weather-bleached sticks offered up over the centuries by pilgrims was just visible, silhouetted against the sky. From this distance, where one couldn't see the rusted mufflers, tugrik coins, and open cans Tikhanov said had been tossed there by more recent, less reverent travelers, it did have the mysterious look of a religious shrine.

"Yes," said Tikhanov. "That's where Rudenko took the fossil from," he added.

They had seen the body before they reached the *ger*.

Now Dorj forced himself to stoop down next to the corpse again. As always, he tried to distance himself, tried to believe it was only a story, just as—in the opposite way, of course—he tried at the theater to believe that Prospero's island really existed. There was so much in fantasy one wished to feel and so much in reality one wished not to feel.

"Did you hear a shot?" he asked Samga.

"No."

The size of the wound indicated a pistol had been used. Could the wind have masked the sound of a pistol from three hundred meters? Could the shot have wakened a sleeping person?

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"And you heard nothing else? Saw nothing? Trucks? Horsemen?"

"Nothing."

"And your wife?" He managed to fix Magsa with his gaze, thinking it unlikely she could have seen anything in her state—stumbling around backwards and raving. But procedure must be followed. Not surprisingly, she shook her head dumbly.

He gingerly, almost shyly, examined Rudenko's clothing again. He scowled, deepening the lines in his narrow face. What did he know so far? It was obvious the Russian had been killed where he stood, in the middle of the desert. His wallet had not been taken. He had taken nothing else of value to the *ger*. Dorj pulled the fossilized bone—the tarbosaur bone—from the dead man's belt. It felt heavy.

"Shouldn't you call the authorities?" said Tikhanov.

Inspector Dorj stood. A sharp bit of gravel had worked its way into his boot. He wanted to bend down, remove his boot, and relieve himself of the minor annoyance, but it seemed too petty a thing to do in the face of death. He walked a few paces from the small group, allowing himself enough privacy to think. He did not bother to remind the Russian that he—Dorj—was the "authority" out here.

He couldn't help putting himself in the dead man's place. Awakening, drunk and confused, in the smoky *ger*. Thanks to the flat topography of the Gobi, the lights of the encampment were visible, inviting. Not far. He must have stumbled out into the night, sucking the clean, freezing air into his lungs, wondering where his colleague was.

He would have walked alone, in a self-contained circle created by the sound of his own feet, the ghostly mist issuing from his own mouth, the sound of his heart beating in his ears the way it does when you've had too much to drink. Had Samga even tried to stop him?

He couldn't have heard the horsemen. Or might have mistaken the sound of the hoofbeats for one of Samga's yaks. And then . . . ?

What was left of Rudenko lay sprawled where he'd fallen, as if he'd simply leaned his head forward to go to sleep on the ground. If only he'd continued to sleep on the safer ground inside the *ger*.

Dorj walked back to where the body lay. His thin, lined face looked even more gaunt than usual in the cutting light of early morning. Tikhanov had stopped pacing, temporarily, and stood near Samga and his wife.

"The bandits might be miles away already," said Tikhanov. "We have to do something."

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"If it was the bandits, why didn't they take anything?" asked Dorj. "Did he have anything with him, besides his wallet . . . and this bone?"

"I don't know anything about Mongolian bandits," said Tikhanov. "You don't suspect me, do you?"

"You argued with him about the site. Maybe he resented your authority. You're younger, after all."

Dorj looked down at the tarbosaur bone. Would one human being kill another over a fossilized fragment of a creature that had perished millions of years before?"

"Look," said Tikhanov, "you haven't talked to anyone else at the site. They'll tell you the truck never left the camp after you came back last night. You said he was shot from above. I can't ride a horse, let alone shoot somebody from one. Anyway, there don't seem to be any horses handy."

Dorj studied Tikhanov's face. It was young and relatively unlined. An innocent face. Yes, he could imagine him lurking outside the *ger,* in ambush, but confronting his colleague, ordering him to his knees, executing him military style?

No, he couldn't imagine such a thing.

"Besides," Tikhanov continued—and it almost seemed to Dorj that he had thought it all out too well in the short time since they'd found the corpse—"I don't own a pistol."

Dorj could almost feel the vast emptiness of the desert pressing against him. A pistol, whosever it was, could have been easily concealed in that vastness, at least temporarily, with no trouble. But where would Tikhanov have found one?

"In Mongolia, military service is compulsory. Is that also true of Russia?"

The small sharp bit of gravel shifted under his sock and bit into the sole of his foot. He glanced down at his boot, thought of removing it again.

The archaeologist was silent.

Again Dorj knelt by the corpse.

"Rudenko's boots are on backwards," he said. "He removed them when he entered the *ger.* We all did. Now they're on backwards."

"Well, he was drunk when he put them back on," said Tikhanov. "That's hardly surprising, is it?"

"Maybe it's surprising he remembered to put them on at all."

Dorj's eyes left the dead man. He stared out toward the horizon. He could see a hawk circling, could make out the top of the *obo.*

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The sunlight was cold and brittle, but he was recalling the flickering, firelit interior of the *ger,* remembering Rudenko falling face forward.

Dorj shifted the fossil from his right hand to his left. Fighting a shudder of revulsion, he thrust his free hand into the dirt beside Rudenko's knee. Yes. It was there.

He rose, fist clenched tightly.

Tikhanov's face was blank. Samga frowned and stepped forward. Magsa remained utterly still.

Without preamble Dorj opened his fist.

It held the gritty eyeball of a sheep.

Samga reached into his robe, but even as he pulled out his old military pistol, Dorj whipped the tarbosaur bone upwards. It caught the Mongolian on the temple. After a million years, the ancient carnivore—or a small piece of it—claimed another victim.

Magsa began a weird chant ending in a scream that went on and on and was greedily devoured by the desert.

Dorj explained his thinking wearily as he sat with Tikhanov in his tent at the site that afternoon. Samga and his wife had disassembled the *ger,* moved it a hundred yards, and reassembled it, all during the previous night. The nomads customarily set up their homes in a few hours, but it had taken Dorj and two policemen until midafternoon just to take the canvas and felt covered structure apart. Samga and Magsa, in custody, and on their way to Gurvan Tes and justice, had no more need of their portable home.

And then there was the question of evidence. On one strip of felt, which had been next to the wooden trellis that formed the *ger's* frame, concealed by the waterproof canvas on the outside and the extra layers of felt inside, Dorj found the few stains where Rudenko's blood had spattered against what had, at the time, been part of the *ger's* interior wall. In a drawer of the painted chest he found ammunition for the pistol, an old Russian Tokarev—the same pistol Samga was wearing in the photo of him standing in his uniform in front of Sukhe Bator's statue.

"I saw Rudenko hide the sheep's eyeball by his knee during dinner," he told Tikhanov. "He never moved. He never woke up once he passed out. He was shot, from above."

"So if they moved the *ger,* it would look as if he'd been killed outside, and you'd assume the bandits had done it and not look any further."

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Dorj nodded.

"But why did Samga shoot him?"

"He didn't. Magsa did."

Tikhanov's face registered disbelief. "That drunken old woman?"

"Not exactly drunk," said Dorj. "I should have realized earlier, but this culture—out here—is new to me. She's a shaman. Remember the headdress?"

"Yes, but she was stumbling around drunk."

"She was in a shamanistic trance—which isn't entirely inconsistent with being drunk. One of the characteristics is doing things backwards. When she replaced Rudenko's boots, in her trance state, she naturally put them on him backwards."

"Why did she do it?"

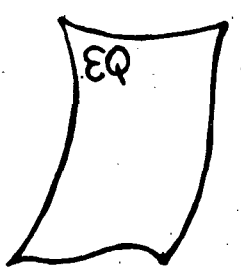
"She thought your friend had desecrated the *obo* by removing the fossil from it."

"Yes, by removing the offering. I suppose, after it happened, Samga wanted to protect her."

The young archaeologist did not, Dorj noted, seem overly grieved by his colleague's death. He looked at the ceiling of the modern, Russian-manufactured tent.

Two more Mongolians had traded the old life for the new—although these two would be taking up residence in jail cells rather than an apartment block. It seemed that in all Mongolia only Investigator Dorj was doomed to travel backwards.

NOTE: The authors wish to acknowledge linguistic assistance from John Ting and Sam Long, although any errors in terminology are their own work.



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In his choice of subject matter, Donald Olson might almost be used to define the word cozy. Ladies who form gardening clubs, bridge-playing housewives, connoisseurs of art and antiques, librarians, and others of genteel habits are often his subjects. He treats them sympathetically but with a subtle touch of irony, making his one of the most reassuring voices of the traditional mystery short story . . .

HOLD FOR ARRIVAL

by DONALD OLSON

One sunny afternoon in early autumn Miss Copeland arrived at her bed-and-breakfast vacation retreat in the Poconos, a modest sort of inn agreeably situated beside a waterfall, where she was warmly greeted by Lila Featherstone, the owner-manager.

"I always look forward to your visit, Miss Copeland, and our cozy little chats. May I say you're looking uncommonly well?"

"How kind of you," Miss Copeland murmured. She was a buxom little woman so free of vanity and worldliness she'd never in her life worn makeup or changed the style of her hair.

"Been a good year, has it?"

"Last few weeks have been somewhat fraught, but maybe next year will be better."

"That's the spirit, dear. We live to hope and hope to live." Lila Featherstone laughed, as she did every year upon greeting her guests with the same quip.

Only the week before, Miss Copeland had been feeling anything but uncommonly well. Severely depressed came closer to the truth. For weeks she'd awakened with the same dull ache of foreboding, as predictable as those minor arthritic twinges she'd learned to disregard. Thoughts of the upcoming meeting of the Maplecrest Memorial Library's board of trustees weighed as heavily upon her mind as would an imminent parole board hearing upon the mind of a convicted felon.

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The board's decision, of course, was a foregone conclusion. Thirty years of devoted service as librarian would carry as little weight as the felon's behavior behind bars.

The Fahrlander Faction, as Miss Copeland called it, would have its way; she was to be cast aside in favor of some younger librarian, one with the proper academic credentials and computer know-how which hadn't been important when Miss Copeland was first installed as librarian. And with no pension to eke out her meager savings she could regard the future only as one of dismal, penny-pinching uncertainty.

The last time Miss Copeland had ventured to broach the subject of a pension, Emily Fahrlander, the rich and autocratic president of the board of trustees, had replied with a look of sympathy as shallow as her taste in literature. "Quite impossible, my dear. You know how strained the budget is already. I'm sure your savings and social security will be perfectly adequate, given your unpretentious lifestyle."

Having done the library's banking for so many years, and knowing how many generous memorial donations had fattened its account, Miss Copeland felt for the first time a stirring of something stronger than contempt for Emily Fahrlander.

Normally, Miss Copeland would arrive at the library no earlier than ten o'clock and not leave until long after it had closed, beavering away at her mountainous backlog of work, which reinforced Emily Fahrlander's contention that Miss Copeland no longer had the energy to keep up the pace. Joan Alexander, Miss Copeland's assistant, would ordinarily open the library at nine and be there when Miss Copeland arrived an hour later.

On that particular fateful Saturday, however, Miss Copeland had awakened earlier than usual. Oppressed by the rain and her own doleful thoughts, she decided to skip breakfast and go to work early. Thus she arrived at the library before Joan. After turning on the lights and adjusting the thermostat and making sure the janitor had left the rest rooms spotless, she returned to the front of the library and scooped up the books dropped through the after-hours depository slot the night before.

This morning there were only half a dozen, but among them lay a thick manila envelope. As its contents rattled when shaken, it clearly didn't hold any book or magazine or videotapes. With a perplexed frown, Miss Copeland slit it open and dumped its contents on the circulation desk.

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Had a live rattlesnake dropped from the envelope, Miss Copeland's astonishment could not have been greater. Jewelry. Not junk jewelry, not worthless trinkets which might have suggested somebody's idea of a joke, but clearly the genuine articles, lying there in a glittering heap: earrings, bracelets, necklaces, brooches, all set with diamonds and other precious stones.

For a long moment Miss Copeland stared at them mutely, her mouth open, her heart racing, then with trembling fingers she picked them up, piece by piece, as if only by touching them could she verify the evidence of her eyes. They were real. She was not dreaming.

She was still sitting at the desk when Joan arrived a few minutes before nine. A full-figured young woman with short-cut brown hair, a peach-blossom complexion, and a voice so husky people on the telephone often thought they were speaking to a man, Joan had worked at the library for about five years.

Joan was clearly surprised to find Miss Copeland already there. "Don't tell me you didn't go home last night," she said. Once Joan had arrived to find the older woman sound asleep over a tray of catalogue cards.

Miss Copeland took a deep breath, pulled open a drawer, and took out the envelope, laying it on the desk and saying shakily: "I came in early. I found this. Someone had dropped it in the depository. Open it up."

Joan opened the envelope, peeked inside, made a gasping sound, and dumped out the jewelry.

"My God. Is it *real?*"

"It's real."

"You sure?"

"Well, look at it, can't you tell?"

Joan poked through the items. "This is crazy."

"I know. I still can't believe it. Where did it come from?"

Joan slowly put each piece back in the envelope. "Have you called the police?"

"No, I've been too stunned even to think straight."

"We must call them right away. They can deal with it." She glanced up at the clock. "If I call them now they can get here before we open."

Joan walked back to the office while Miss Copeland went through the motions of preparing the circulation desk for the morning's business.

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Joan returned to say she'd talked to a Detective Wellman who would be right over. "He asked if we'd *touched* the envelope. How did he think we'd opened it without touching it, for goodness sake?"

Something kept prodding Miss Copeland's mind, something about the contents of that envelope, but what it was remained formlessly elusive. She said, "We all thought it was a great mystery when someone slipped a pair of eyeglasses through the slot, but *this*. Unbelievable."

"I'll make coffee. We both need something."

Joan was still in the conference room where they kept the coffeemaker when the detective arrived. A bulky, broad-faced man with thick black hair and heavy-lidded brown eyes, he asked Miss Copeland if she was the woman who'd called the station.

"No, that was my assistant. I'm Mabel Copeland, the librarian." She opened the drawer and produced the envelope. Wellman said nothing as he examined the jewelry.

"Are they real?" Miss Copeland asked. "They look real to me but how can they be?"

Wellman shrugged. "Yeah, they're real, all right."

Joan came out of the conference room and asked the detective if he'd like a cup of coffee. He shook his head. "I'd better get this stuff back to the station right away." Slipping the jewelry into the envelope, he turned toward the door. Suddenly Miss Copeland knew what had been nagging at her mind.

"Oh, just a minute. I just thought of something. I'm sure I'm right. One of those brooches, the ruby rose with emerald leaves. I've seen it before. Yes! One of our patrons, a trustee, Emily Fahrlander, I'm sure I've seen her wearing one exactly like it. Could all this be *hers*? Could someone have—I'm going to call her right now. Maybe—"

"Never mind," said Wellman sharply. "I'll check it out."

"No, wait . . ." Suddenly things didn't seem right to Miss Copeland, who was nobody's fool. It was more than simply an atmosphere. She had read enough police procedurals to know that detectives followed a certain protocol in their inquiries. Why this unseemly haste to be gone? No notes written, no statements taken? No, something was definitely not right.

"Forgive me," she said with an apologetic smile, "maybe I read too many detective novels, but shouldn't we see your identification? And shouldn't we get a receipt for what you're taking?"

Wellman's pained expression made her feel as if she'd committed an inexcusable social blunder. He turned his gaze upon Joan and

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said softly, with a shade of menace, "What did you tell her?"

Joan said, "I didn't tell her anything. Don't be stupid."

This extraordinary remark caused Miss Copeland to look at Joan with as open an expression of dismay as when the jewelry had fallen out of the envelope.

"Joan . . . ? What's he talking about?"

It was as if Joan's face had uncannily assumed the aspect of a total stranger. "You *had* to come in early, didn't you? This *one* day you had to get here first."

Often of late, in those first seconds after rising from her bed, Miss Copeland had felt a disturbing lightness of the head, precisely the feeling she had now. "Dear God, you knew they were there. You knew, didn't you?"

"Yes, I knew."

"But *why?* I don't understand. What's going on here?"

"Shut up, both of you," Wellman barked.

Joan said, "Okay, mastermind, what do we do now?"

Wellman glanced up at the clock. "We stick to our original plan."

"What about her?"

"We'll have no problem with her, will we, Miss Copeland?"

Miss Copeland felt the onset of panic. "Joan, tell me. Who is this man? What is he to you?"

"We're lovers. Shock you, does it? Just because I don't gossip like those silly women who volunteer at the desk doesn't mean I don't have a man in my life. We don't all carry on love affairs with books, like you. Books! I'm sick of the sight of them."

Aghast at the venom in Joan's tone, at the knowledge of having worked with this woman for five years in complete ignorance of her true character, Miss Copeland was close to tears. "Then I'm right. Those are Emily Fahrlander's jewels. He stole them."

Wellman laughed. "Right out from under her sleeping nose. Joanie did her homework well."

"The silly old bitch did it for me," said Joan with a smirk. "Every damn time I delivered books to her house—always too *busy* to come in and pick them out for herself—she'd be wearing one or another of those baubles. Showed me the whole lot one day. Even told me how her security system worked. Couldn't stop bragging. You know what she's like. The Duchess of Maplecrest. No harm in telling *me*. What was I? Nothing but a mousey library drone. So easily impressed."

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Emily Fahrlander lived in a Victorian mansion less than four blocks from the library. Wellman made no attempt to silence Joan as she revealed how easy it had been for him to enter the house, disable the alarm system, force the safe, and steal the jewels. Then stroll nonchalantly to the library, slip the envelope into the depository slot, and go home to his apartment. The jewels were in his possession less than fifteen minutes.

"Enough babbling," said Wellman at that point. "We've got twenty minutes to do the rest. Let's go into your office, Madame Librarian. Maybe you can help."

The office was small and cluttered, striplighted except for a tier of glass-brick windows high on the wall. Wellman ordered Miss Copeland to sit down while Joan proceeded with the second stage of their plan, removing the jewels from the envelope, wrapping them in tissue, and sealing them in one of the padded bags used for mailing books. She then inserted a label in the typewriter and was about to address it when Wellman stopped her.

"Do that later. She's got eyes, you know." Then, to Miss Copeland: "Take your keys out of your bag and unlock that safe."

When Miss Copeland didn't move, Joan grabbed her bag from the counter where the librarian had placed it and tossed it on the desk.

"No dawdling," said Wellman. "You open in twenty minutes. Today's Saturday. Library closes at noon. You're going to be locked in here for those two hours. You will not make a sound. Not a whisper."

He reached under his jacket and drew out a pistol. "One peep and something bad happens to one of your patrons. Is that clear?"

Miss Copeland nodded, unable to speak, her gaze fixed on the gun. Never had she been this close to a gun before.

"Now take the safe key off your key ring and give it here."

With the key Wellman opened the small safe where book-fine money and petty cash were kept overnight, placed the mailing bag inside, locked the safe, and pocketed the key.

Joan said, "If anyone asks for you I'll tell them you asked not to be disturbed. You can keep busy getting those interlibrary loan books ready for mailing."

At five to ten Joan and Wellman left the office. Miss Copeland drew a long breath, not stirring from her chair as presently she heard the murmur of patrons' voices beyond the door. Occasionally someone could be heard using the copy machine just outside the door, and Joan must have put a record on the player behind the

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circulation desk. Miss Copeland would never have believed Debussy could sound like a funeral dirge.

She waited several minutes before opening the center drawer of her desk, removing a small envelope from the rear, and taking out a duplicate key to the safe, blessing her good sense in never revealing its existence to Joan or any of the volunteers.

Quickly she opened the safe, removed the book mailer, and set it aside. She then selected an identical mailing bag, wrapped up a selection of paper clips, pencils, and other odds and ends to simulate the weight of the jewelry, sealed them in the bag, and placed it in the safe. The bag with the jewels she hid behind a pile of books on one of the metal shelves lining one wall of the office.

Sitting down long enough to quiet her pounding heart, she then began typing labels and affixing them on the bags of books to be sent out on interlibrary loan, all the while thinking of that ugly gun and wondering what the precious pair had in mind for her. Would they kill her? After all, she could identify them. Joan Alexander as a killer, or even the accomplice of a killer? Inconceivable.

A few minutes after noon the door opened and Joan and her lover joined Miss Copeland in the office. Joan looked approvingly at the stack of book bags neatly labeled. "Very good," she said. "How does it feel, being involved in a jewel robbery? Beats fiction, doesn't it?"

Wellman laughed at Miss Copeland's expression. "Don't worry, love, nobody's getting hurt."

"Not even Mrs. Got Rocks," said Joan. "Or should I say Mrs. *Had* Rocks? Stuff's all insured. She even told me that. Look at it this way, we're paying her back for what she's doing to you. But for her, you wouldn't be losing your job."

Wellman opened the safe and removed the book mailer. Miss Copeland held her breath, but all he did was hand it to Joan. "Okay, sweetheart, now you can label it. You come outside with me, Miss C."

Joan had switched off the striplighting, leaving the library in shadows. Beyond the door rain had begun to fall.

"What are you going to do to me?" Miss Copeland asked.

Wellman smiled, clearly more relaxed after the success of his venture so far. "Nothing bad, love. Lock you in the storeroom. It can't be opened from the inside. Somebody'll rescue you by Monday morning. Joanie and I'll be long gone, resting up after our exertions and waiting for that package of goodies to arrive. You won't be too uncomfortable. The storeroom's air-conditioned and Joanie will

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leave you with enough snacks to see you through the weekend."

The prospect of being locked in the storeroom didn't bother Miss Copeland unduly; better that than a coffin, and the janitor would arrive late Sunday evening.

Presently Joan came from the office carrying the bundle of book mailers. The post office was just up the street.

Actually, it was rather cozy in the storeroom. There were books and periodicals to read and being reduced to a diet of cheese and crackers wouldn't hurt her at all, she reasoned. And there was plenty of time to think. She thought about all the happy years she'd spent in this building, which was more of a home to her than her little apartment, of the many children she'd introduced to the joys of reading, of the interesting people she'd met through the years. She would miss it all, miss it dreadfully. However would she fill the empty days?

Traveling to the great cities she'd read about would remain a dream; never would she enjoy the pleasure of visiting the world's most famous libraries.

She thought gleefully of the looks on the thieves' faces when they opened that package in some distant hideaway and found nothing but junk. What she didn't dare think about, although the hope lay wistfully in her mind, was that her bravery and cleverness in foiling the robbery might encourage Emily Fahrlander and her fellow board members to reverse its decision to retire her.

Sunday night came and with it the janitor who released her from her prison. A barrage of publicity followed. It was easily the most exciting thing that had happened in the village of Maplecrest since the old Victoria Hotel had burned to the ground five years ago.

"Breakfast at the usual time, my dear," said Lila Featherstone as Miss Copeland moved toward the stairs. "Let me know if there's anything you need."

Miss Copeland clapped her hands in surprised pleasure as she entered her bed-sitting room. New chintz curtains and bedspread matched the pattern of pink roses and forget-me-nots on the freshly prepared walls. Pure Laura Ashley. Delightful.

Flowers on the white wicker writing desk, and beside them the book mailing bag, its label addressed to herself at the inn with the notation *Hold for Arrival.*

Making sure the door was locked, she unsealed the bag and dumped the glittering baubles out onto the bed, then sat down and lovingly fingered each piece.

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"Mabel Copeland," she whispered, "you're a *very* naughty lady." If she lived to be a hundred, and for the first time she rather hoped she would, she would never understand the wayward impulse that had overpowered her scruples minutes after the janitor had unlocked the storeroom door. All she clearly remembered feeling was an absolute conviction that saving Emily Fahrlander's jewels would earn her no greater reward from that imperious dragon than a few words of gratitude.

Gratitude, after thirty years of dedicated service, was simply not enough.

Now it was as if each piece of jewelry bore a label with the name of the city where eventually it would be discreetly sold off by a seemingly respectable little old lady who had fallen upon hard times. Cities where she could spend hours browsing happily in those renowned libraries. She fondled a diamond and sapphire necklace and thought—Paris. *The Bibliotheque Nationale.* Now *there* was a library!

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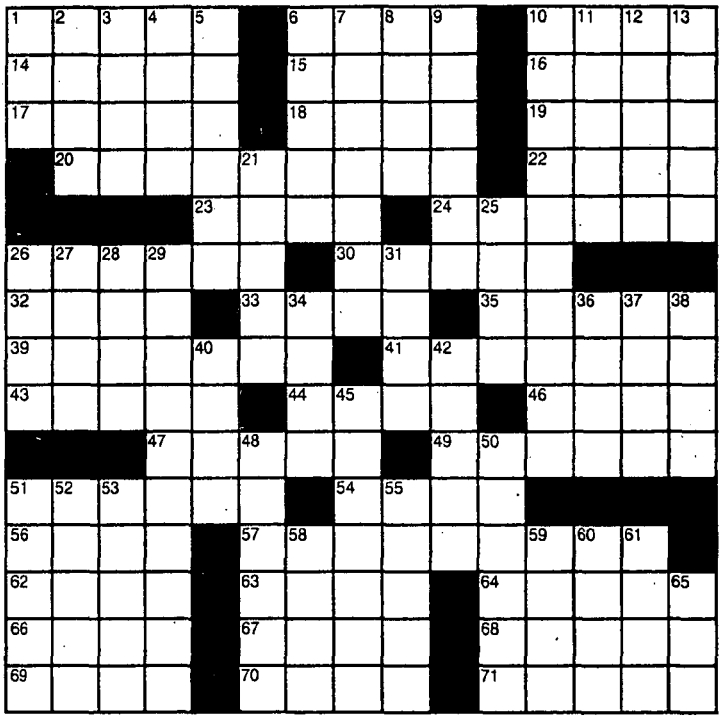
THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

By Beth Allison



Solution on page 124

MYSTERIOUS MODIFIERS

ACROSS

1 Parts of a revue
6 Bargain hunter's delight
10 —— town, *sl. for* depart from
14 —— Beach, Cal.
15 Leather in Lyons
16 Milan's money
17 V.P. nominee Stevenson
18 Great Barrier Island
19 Galatea's beloved
20 Anne Perry's *Mourning*
22 Mince
23 Turnip, *Scot.*
24 *Make No Bones* author Aaron

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26 Nomad
30 —— Shankman, creator of Samantha Adams
32 Famous lioness
33 Killed by his mother, Procne, and served up to his father Tereus
35 Sides
39 Engaged girl
41 Criminals often have these
43 Infamous traitor in WW II, —— Rose
44 Hartebeste
46 Not this
47 Reside
49 "——, the eye of Greece"
51 Aegis
54 Church recess
56 Home for Pedro
57 P.D. James's *Causes*
62 Not up
63 Bounders
64 Alpine region
66 Red River Rebellion leader Louis ——
67 Special times for Christmas and the New Year
68 Florida city
69 Remain
70 Dry
71 Barbara ——, creator of Blanche White

DOWN

1 Health resort
2 Pirate Captain
3 —— de León
4 Gov't. agent
5 Well groomed
6 Twenty
7 Dr. Scarpetta's interest
8 In —— of, instead
9 Found at the blackboard
10 Julian Symons's *Poisonings*
11 Chinese fruit tree, *var.*
12 Archer in the sky
13 Stinging insects
21 Weird
25 Sequential syllables
26 Deprived
27 Hodgepodge
28 Showy Asian tree
29 Patricia Moyes's *Returns*
31 Botanist Gray's namesakes
34 Shade of blue
36 Legendary tennis star
37 Base
38 Kennedy visitors
40 Part of 52 down for Brother Cadfael
42 —— said, soonest mended.
45 Defamation
48 Brings out
50 German
51 Evidence of wounds
52 See 40 down
53 "—— voice . . . I can hear my Thisby's face," *Midsummer Night's Dream*
55 Out of style
58 Central part of a church
59 *Having Wonderful Crime* by Craig ——
60 Old Roman altars
61 Lounge
65 *And Leave Her —— Dying,* John Lawrence Reynolds

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James C. Mitchell was a television journalist for twenty-five years, mostly in Louisville, Kentucky. He is a lawyer by training and although he doesn't practice, for the past year, since he moved to Tucson, Arizona, he has made a living writing articles and book reviews on law. It is his journalist's instinct, however, that shines through in his first work of fiction, in which he sets his P.I. on the trail of a teenage boy's killer . . .

RICHIE'S EYES

by JAMES C. MITCHELL

Richie Martinez had amazing eyes. Everyone said so. He saw what others missed. Backpedaling from behind the line of scrimmage, he could read a quarterback's fake and flash straight to the ball at just the right instant. He set the Arizona state high-school record for interceptions. Good size and good speed, the college scouts said, but outstanding eyes.

His friends liked the warmth in Richie's dark eyes. High-school girls loved their sexy sparkle, the kindness and good humor they saw there. "He's so adorable, I could just die," they often said.

Until Richie died.

Two boys, hiking north of Tucson, stumbled across his body in the desert, a few yards off a country road. Richie Martinez, who didn't have an enemy in the world, had been shot twice in the head. He was nine days short of his eighteenth birthday and three weeks away from starting college.

"Drugs and gangs," people whispered. This was the common instant analysis of teenage homicide, chanted like a mantra by people who never knew Richie. Telephone tipsters bombarded the cops with weird tales of drug sales to football players, of Crips from L.A. recruiting Richie. Police felt obliged to follow up even the goofiest

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lead. They invested countless hours and plenty of shoe leather in the drug and gang angles. Every time, they came up empty.

"Saint Richie," the detectives took to calling their victim. He seemed to have run through the killing fields of barrio adolescence without being touched. Absent the usual villains of youthful violence, there was little to go on. Three weeks later, the morning headline read, "Slow Progress in Martinez Case." The afternoon paper blared, "Cops Clueless in Richie Slaying."

"Yeah, that's about right," Detective Al Gomez said. *"Nada* is what we got, Steve. You have any idea how strange it is, almost a month after a homicide, not having one damn thing worthwhile?"

We were in my small living room, drinking beer and eating chips with hot homemade salsa, watching videotapes of the state championship game. No clues there, either, but the pictures renewed our sense of Richie's power and appeal.

Al and I had seen it, in person, from high in the bleachers. We had gone to hundreds of games together over the years, but this was the one we would remember, even without Richie's sad end.

Al's favorite exclamation that season was "Unbelievable." He had given it a workout that night. Richie made four dazzling interceptions, one so quick that his runback covered five yards before we knew he had the ball. He tackled with a powerfully balletic grace. Even in real life, it looked like a slow-motion replay.

"Unbelievable," Al said again, although he had seen it himself in person.

The news photos had focused on Richie because he was the local star, signed to play at his hometown university, already tapped as a cinch for the NFL. The cameras zoomed in, catching that triumphant light in Richie's eyes when he snagged the errant pass or brought down a runner.

"This is what breaks your heart," I said, as the tape cut to Richie's parents in their 50-yard-line seats. His father roaring with excitement and pride; his mother smiling and crying at once.

"Painful," Al said.

"Maybe I could help them, Al," I said.

He shook his head. "They got no money. Salt of the earth, hard-working guy, Mr. Martinez is. But he's an unskilled laborer and his wife has been sick. They can't afford their own P.I."

I looked back to the screen. There was the famous shot of Richie, vaulting the grandstand rail, running up to hug his mother as the game ended.

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"I don't have to make money on every case," I said.

Al smiled. "Stephen Hardy, private investigator *pro bono,* huh? Unbelievable. Well, go to it, Galahad. Just tread lightly and call me twice a day. We hapless public servants are still in charge of this stuff. Don't forget that, like you do sometimes."

I promised to keep him posted. Al opened another beer, and I opened the phone book to the *M's.*

The Martinez family lived in a subdivision south of Twenty-second Street. The Sonoran desert sun was already blistering when I drove up at 8:30 in the morning. A mirage danced at the end of the dusty block.

When I was a boy, this neighborhood seemed far out of town. Now it was part of the central city. The homes were an odd lot. A few were neglected, with dry weeds in control of the front yards and drooping carports long in need of paint. Most, like the Martinez place, had gleaming windows and driveways swept clean. An old but well-kept Ford was parked outside.

Richie's father was a compact man with the dark leathery skin of an outdoors worker. His handshake was strong, and he held the grip as he thanked me for helping. He led me down a narrow hallway to Richie's bedroom.

"Take your time and look at anything you want, Mr. Hardy," he said. His voice was soft and dignified, but strained with pain. "I'll leave you alone. It's hard for me to be in here."

It looked like many boys' rooms, given mostly to celebration of sports and music. Pennants on the wall, one from his high school and one from UA, where he would have played this year. Pictures of last season's linebackers. A young Danny Villenueva in his Rams uniform, before he moved on to become a Los Angeles business leader.

His cultural heroes were hardly cutting edge, but they reflected his heritage. Publicity pictures of the comedian Paul Rodriguez and the actor Edward James Olmos in his schoolteacher role from *Stand and Deliver.* A poster of Lou Diamond Phillips as Richie Valens, who also died young. Did Mr. and Mrs. Martinez name him for that Richie? Not likely, I realized. They must have been toddlers when "La Bamba" and "Donna" were hits.

There was an autographed photo of Linda Ronstadt, standing with Richie in front of a center for abused and neglected children. Ronstadt, the local who made it big in both Anglo and Hispanic music,

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gave the place thousands of dollars in concert and record royalties. Richie somehow found time for volunteer work there.

A small desk was filled with school projects. He must have been getting a head start on his freshman classes, perhaps to balance the heavy demands of football. There were books on Chicano history, a few on social change in the 1960s and 1970s. A yellowed *Life* magazine lay open to a long pictorial on Cesar Chavez and the farm workers union. The collection was unsparing. It covered setbacks as well as victories. But most articles, in tones of hope, reported progress.

Richie had stacked photocopies of old newspapers several feet high in one corner of the room. I flipped through a few. All had front-page stories about the rise of Hispanics to positions of leadership or influence. Several focused on Henry Cisneros, the former San Antonio mayor named to the Clinton cabinet. Others told of Latinos becoming school superintendents in New York, police chiefs in California, members of Congress from Texas.

Most of the items continued on inside pages, vying for space with seventies youth revolution stories. Miniskirts and bell-bottoms, Beatles and Doors, radical groups bombing universities. Flower children marched for peace and wounded urban terrorists eluded the feds. All their parents looked stunned.

Nothing in Richie's schoolwork seemed to shed light on his murder. His desk contained college scholarship acceptances and a few personal letters. I summoned up my high-school Spanish for one of them. Nothing in the desk seemed significant.

I returned to the living room. Hector Martinez introduced his wife, Virginia. She was a tiny woman with large black eyes that reminded me of Richie's. Hers, though, seemed always close to tears. She seemed a shadow of the proud, happy woman embracing Richie on my videotape.

I repeated the standard interrogation. They gave the same answers. No drugs. No gangs. No strange behavior. I asked about Richie's friends. The parents offered several names, mostly football teammates already visited by the police.

"And there was Gloria," Hector added.

Virginia said, "Of all the good things that happened for Richie, I thought Gloria would be the best. They dated for two years. She's a wonderful girl. I was sick last year, with pneumonia. Gloria would come and sit with me, bring me flowers. She cleaned the house, even. When I was in the hospital, she'd bring dinner for Hector."

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"What happened with her?" I asked.

"They broke up," Hector said. "Just before—just before it happened."

"She stopped coming around then," Virginia said. "It was too hard for her to be here, I think. Anyway, I was feeling better and could do things again. She still called me, though. Still does, to see if I'm okay. She really loved Richie, I think."

I said, "Why did they break up?"

"She wouldn't tell me, and neither would Richie," Virginia said. "But I think it was her father. He has a lot of money, and he thought his daughter could do better than a boy from a poor family like ours."

It wasn't much, but it was the first hint of trouble in the life of Richie Martinez. They gave me Gloria's address and phone number. Gloria Corrales, a very fine street in the Catalina foothills.

The Steele Foundation, where Richie had worked after school and on Saturdays, was on the way, so I stopped there first.

Chuck Smith, the foundation director, looked fortyish, with short hair and a full beard and moustache, graying a bit. He wore tan slacks, a white shirt with long sleeves, and a rep tie. Although he limped slightly, his step was quick with administrative purpose. We went to his office. He had a big, cluttered desk. A sliding glass door opened to a small cactus garden.

"Anything at all we can do to help," he said. "Everyone loved Richie. Such a great kid, full of promise."

"You can help me in two ways," I said. "Point me to any friends he had here, or elsewhere, if you know them. And tell me if you noticed anything unusual shortly before he disappeared. Anything he said. Any change in behavior, work habits, even his mood."

"I don't know about his friends," Smith said. "He worked sometimes with Margaret Wellington, our other student assistant. As for unusual behavior, I've tried to think about that. I swear I can't come up with anything. He was never late to work, right up to the last day. He was friendly and good-natured as always. He worked hard. You know what we do here?"

"Grants and research," I said. "I don't know much about the specifics."

"We're a kind of history resource center for scholars, with emphasis on the Southwest. We have an enormous library of history books and periodicals, we run meetings and teleconferences, we provide funding for a wide range of scholarship projects."

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"And Richie?"

"Richie worked in the library. He tracked down requested information, catalogued materials, and so forth. We have a number of university history professors who use our resources, and they couldn't wait to get him in class. He always gave you a little extra effort. Very different from most kids these days."

"At his house, I saw lots of material on modern-day Hispanic leaders," I said.

"Oh yes," Smith said. "His special passion. It's why he studied history, I think. He wanted to trace the progress of Hispanic Americans in order to show kids that they could do it. He would have been an example himself. A few years in the NFL, with luck, then perhaps a college history professor."

"Was he really so damn perfect?" I asked. "I keep expecting to run into a dark underside. Something his adult friends like you and even his parents might have missed."

"Might be," Smith said, "but I'll bet you next month's pay that you won't find anything like that. For one thing, Richie had no time for trouble. He played sports all year, not just football, although that was his strength. He got good grades. He worked here. He volunteered at charities. No, I don't think you'll discover any ugly surprises.

"If I had to guess, Mr. Hardy," he went on, "I'd say it was pure rotten luck. Somebody picked him up to rob him, like the shoppers you hear about getting kidnapped at the mall parking lots."

"A long way from robbery to shooting him and dumping the body in the desert," I said.

Smith nodded. "Some junkie holds him up, discovers he has no money or too little, so he kills Richie for wasting his time."

It sounded cynical, but his theory would make sense to any anxious citizen who watches the nightly news.

"But," I said, "if you're a panicky junkie, do you hold up an All-State linebacker? A big, obviously strong kid? Or do you go for little old ladies fumbling with their car keys at the supermarket?"

"It's a logical question," Smith said. "But with what goes on these days, I'm not sure there's anything logical about this."

"Too true," I said. "Well, would you introduce me to Margaret?"

Margaret Wellington looked like Miss Teenage England. Tall and thin, she wore her shortish fair hair in the style of Princess Diana. Her fresh, pale complexion had no discernible makeup. Smith told

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her who I was and asked her to help me, then excused himself to return to work.

"God, I can't believe all this," she said. "I never even knew anybody who died, except my grandfather, and he was ninety. To work with someone who got murdered, it's awful."

"Did you know Richie well?" I asked.

"Just here at work," she said. "I mean, we didn't date or anything. He was really a nice guy, but we didn't socialize much, you know."

"How about other friends of his here?" I said.

"Well, there's usually just two of us at a time. Students, I mean. Richie and I started last fall. He thought he might work here again next spring, after football season. I'm going back East to college," she said with the modest smile of the elite.

"Did he mention any friends?" I asked.

She furrowed her pretty brow for a moment. "I met him at the movies once with a girl. Her name was Gloria, I think. She was Mexican but she had really expensive clothes, you know. I forget her last name."

"Tell me, Margaret, in the time before he disappeared, did Richie act strangely, or troubled or excited in any way?"

"No," she said. She pursed her lips. "Except one time, about a week before, he was really intense, looking at some papers and taking notes. I kind of teased him about it and he said he found some interesting history thing. I thought, God, lighten up, you know. School starts soon enough."

"What were the papers, do you recall?"

"No. Just papers. Like Xeroxes, you know? I couldn't tell what he was reading."

She could think of nothing more to help. I gave her my card and asked her to call if she remembered anything else.

The Corrales family lived seven miles and several social crusts north of the Martinez place. The people were no better, in my experience, but every home was auditioning for *Architectural Digest*. Casa Corrales was low and long, shaded by green cedars. Bright bougainvillea set off the white walls. Giant old saguaro cacti stood guard. The garage was open. A Lexus sedan and a BMW convertible rested inside, with room for two more.

A man with a fifty-dollar haircut and a gold Rolex answered my knock. The chill of air conditioning spilled out from the doorway.

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"Mr. Corrales?" I asked. He nodded but said nothing, simply waited for me to explain myself.

I gave him my card and said, "I'm looking into Richie Martinez's death. I wonder if I could speak with your daughter."

"No," he said.

He was a practiced, effective autocrat. I almost apologized and skulked away.

"We're eager to talk with everyone who knew Richie, sir," I said, giving the "sir" my best sycophantic tone. "Your daughter is more likely than anyone to know something important."

"Gloria has made statements to the police. That's the end of it," he said. "I worked my whole life to give her the best of everything, to protect her from poverty and violence." From the anger in his voice, I couldn't tell which he considered more offensive, Richie's poverty or his violent end. "We don't need this," he said.

He shut the door in my face.

BMW convertibles were the chariot of choice for wealthy southwestern students, so I parked down the road and waited to see if Gloria would venture out. Lucky guess. She tooled past me just a few minutes later, the Beemer's top down, her dark hair blowing in the hot breeze.

I had to trail her only a few blocks to a small shopping center. She pulled up in front of a video store. I followed her inside. She walked quickly to a deserted corner of the building and began browsing at a shelf marked "Foreign."

I stood beside her, feigning interest in a respectable-looking Swedish drama. Even in my peripheral vision, I could see a small, knowing smile.

"You were looking for me, weren't you?" she said.

"Yes," I said. "Your father didn't seem happy about it."

"I was in the living room and heard you at the door. I thought you might watch for me," she said. "I want to help if I can."

"Why did you and Richie break up?" I asked. "Was it pressure from your father?"

"Daddy tried, but he knew he couldn't keep us apart," she said. "He couldn't lock me up like the virgin daughter of some rich *patrón* in old Mexico."

"Did he ever threaten Richie?"

She looked at me with genuine puzzlement. In a mocking tough tone, she said, "You mean, like, Stay away from my precious baby or I'll kill you?"

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I nodded. "Good grief, no," she said. "Daddy's kind of a throwback and a snob, but he's not a thug."

"So why did you break up?"

Gloria thought for a moment, her eyes wandering along the shelves. Then she pointed to a video of Truffaut's *The Man Who Loved Women*. "Did you ever see this?" she asked.

"Yes," I said. "Long time ago."

"Teenage guys, sometimes, they're like the man in the movie," she said. "They just have to move along to the next girl for a while. Macho, you know. I thought that's what Richie was doing. But he said that wasn't it."

"What did he say it was?"

"He said something had happened. He found something out, and he didn't want to put me in danger because I was close to him. It sounded nuts to me."

"From what I hear about Richie," I said, "I wouldn't think he went in for melodrama. And I wouldn't think he'd lie to you."

"You're right," she said. "But he refused to tell me what he found out, or why it might threaten me."

Richie had learned something dangerous. Margaret Wellington remembered papers, like Xeroxes, and so did I. But I could not imagine how news accounts of mid-century Hispanic advancement might connect with murder.

Hector Martinez led me once again down the narrow hall and, as he had before, left me alone in Richie's room. I sat on the bed, staring at the posters and the pictures and the books. Then I picked up the old newspaper copies and read every word.

It was a frustrating exercise. Henry Cisneros probably had an alibi. We could rule out Cesar Chavez. I plodded through the pages. A Guatemalan immigrant now owned ten McDonald's franchises in New Mexico. A young Mexican-American woman from Texas won a Rhodes scholarship. In California, a Latino state senator ascended to a legislative leadership position.

Next to that story, on the front page of an old Los Angeles paper, I saw four photos of fugitive suspects in the fatal bombing at the offices of Amigos Unidos—United Friends, a regional Rainbow Coalition that thrived until several of its officers were accused of embezzlement.

"Police intelligence sources believe that one suspect, Charles Hargreaves III, was injured in the explosion, in which most of the coali-

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tion's records were destroyed. Hargreaves, descended from a prominent Texas oil family, may have suffered serious burns to his upper body, as well as leg or hip injuries," an informant had told investigators.

At least Hargreaves lived. The coalition's president, who was not suspected of any crime, had been killed in the blast. A front-page picture showed the governor of California consoling the victim's Hispanic wife at graveside. A little girl held the widow's hand. On the facing page, the Hargreaves parents sat for a news photo and wondered aloud where they had failed.

Back on page one, a young face stared angrily at me. Hargreaves had been one of several Anglos among the organizations mainly Hispanic and Indian leadership. He was clean-shaven, but he wore the emblematic long hair of the period's radicals. I wondered how old he would be now and what he would look like. Like his father perhaps. Then I saw what Richie's eyes had seen.

Al Gomez knew that if I had this one right, I would slip away quietly and Detective Gomez would get the arrest and the credit. We had done it that way before. So Al brought his gun and his badge and an evidence kit when we entered the Steele Foundation. Chuck Smith received us in his office.

Gomez said, "Mr. Smith, we're trying to identify fingerprints on some of Richie's books and magazines. Many of them come from the foundation here, so we'd like to get your prints for comparison. Just to eliminate any that turn up on Richie's things, you understand."

Smith fingered his beard and looked hard at Gomez, then at me.

"Seems a bit much," he said.

"It'll only take a minute," Gomez said.

"What did you find in Richie's things?" Smith asked, tugging at his shirt sleeve.

I leaned across his desk and dropped the California bombing article in front of him.

His expression did not change, but I thought his shoulders slumped as he read the old story.

"And you'd get the fugitive's prints from California," he said.

"Got 'em an hour ago," Gomez said.

Smith kept staring at the papers. "So this was it," he said. "Richie told me that he found out, but he never told me how. It had been so long. After a while, you forget that stuff like this is in the archives. I suppose he just stumbled on it by accident, doing his research."

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"That's what I think, too," I said. "Your college picture looked slightly familiar. But your father's picture was in one of the stories, and he looked remarkably like you look now. Then Richie put some more things together. Chuck for Charles. The limp, from an injury in the bombing. The beard and the long sleeves, maybe to cover burns."

Smith nodded. "He said he hadn't told anyone yet. I had to act fast, before he did. I offered him a ride home that night. We'd been working late and it was dark."

"He took a ride from you?" Gomez asked.

"Of course," Smith said without irony.

"He wasn't afraid," Gomez said. "Maybe he wasn't going to turn you in."

"I couldn't take that chance," Smith said. "I keep a gun in my car. There's been so much crime lately. We swung around a deserted block off Twenty-second Street and I shot him, then drove out to the desert on the other side of town and dumped his body."

The confident administrator had vanished. Smith looked pleadingly at Gomez and me. "You can understand, can't you? I made a mistake years ago but I became a good person; I even gave the money away. I had built a new life here and Richie had no right to destroy it. I really had no choice."

"Unbelievable," Gomez said.

"You might have done just a little time for the bombing death," I said. "It was so many years ago. The old seventies passions have faded. But you won't beat this one."

"I know," he said. "Everyone loved Richie."

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A hearty welcome back to an EQMM *Department of First Stories author whose work we haven't seen since 1983. Since he began writing fiction for us in 1978, Mr. McConnell has also published stories in* Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine *and in the 1986 Mystery Writers of America anthology* Last Laughs. *He lives in Ontario, New York, and pursues a full-time occupation as an industrial engineer. . . .*

DEADLY CARNIVAL

by CHARLES R. McCONNELL

Harry's thoughts bounced off each other uncertainly as in a thick fog. His head pounded. Questions wanted to form themselves but didn't do very well at coming together. Answers came in scraps, in disconnected pieces. Sweeping aside nonessentials and tidying up the rest, it might have gone something like:

Q. *Why does it feel damp and cool and lumpy under me? Where the hell am I?*

A. *On the ground, dummy, stretched out on the grass. It usually feels cool there.*

Q. *What happened to my head?*

A. *Haven't the faintest idea. Except that this kind of pain usually means someone's hit me. Lump or a soft spot on the right side. Could tell better if I could find my head with my hands.*

Q. *What's going on? Why am I here?*

A. *Again, Belmont, no idea. —Wait, there was something. Needed money. Looking for Boxie. Found him and—*

Q. *Something's wrong, ain't it? Really, really wrong.*

A. *About as wrong as it can get. Boxie's dead and they think I did it. I'm in deep, deep—*

"I think he's waking up." A voice out of the pain and blackness. Deep and snarly, coming from over his head, it continued, "Ought to club him again. Hold him till the cops get here."

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Then another voice. Soft, feminine. "He's hurt. Give him some room. Little guy like him, he's not going anywhere with so many people here."

Harry liked the soothing voice even though *little guy* aroused in him the same fleeting anger he felt whenever anyone made reference to his size.

Q. *Able to open the eyes yet? See the angel behind the voice and find out what happened to Boxie?*

A. *Let's give it a shot.*

Eyelids sticky, held by a messy combination of glue and fine sand. That's it; they're opening. Blink to get the thinner, clearer fluid moving, blink a couple more times to bring the shapes above into focus. Looking better. Things clearing up.

The first sight to greet Harry was a broad, milky-white, slightly quivering expanse of female chest, the deliberate overflow above the bustline of a costume of fluorescent green. But as this not-unpleasant view came into focus Harry's eyes were pulled both left and right by movement on either side of the expanse of skin. Just as Harry realized that the moving something-or-other was a sort of dull mottled green and as thick as an arm—maybe even as thick as a leg—there was more movement in the upper right of his view and the head of a large snake bobbed into sight just inches before his eyes and the reptile's tongue flickered and its mouth spread wide and it greeted Harry with a throaty "Hhaah!"

Harry gurgled and dropped solidly back onto the grass. Never had blackness been so welcome.

Less than two hours before the hissed greeting, Harry Belmont was nursing his aged, exhaust-spewing Buick toward the city limits, wondering if he had enough gas to get home. He was pondering his deepening familiarity with poverty—specifically the five one-dollar bills in his wallet which, along with a bit of rattling change, made up his total liquid resources—and thinking about people who owed him money.

And there were a few people who owed Harry money. Not that he ever had much to lend, but he'd handed out a few bucks here and there when he had money, staking others the way some staked him from time to time.

As Harry wondered who he could collect an old debt from or who he could tap for a few bucks, he drove past a billboard advertising the annual county fair. Bannered across the bottom half of the sign

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was: *With the Carnival of Wonders on the Midway.*

The Carnival of Wonders. That meant Boxie. Or *maybe* it meant Boxie; Harry hadn't seen Boxie in two or three years, so he might not still be with the carnival, might not still be pouring his heart and soul into separating people from their money with his slick skin games. But it was worth a try. The carnival was between Harry and home, just a short hop off the main road. But most important, Boxie owed Harry money. Real money. Nearly two hundred bucks, the biggest loan Harry had ever been able to make, going back to the last time they'd seen each other and Boxie had gotten himself in trouble.

With no more than a glance at the gas-gauge needle quivering against the E, Harry decided to go to the fairgrounds. His resolve wavered only slightly when, minutes later, he parted with two of his dollars for parking and general admission.

Of course, Harry first had to try to talk his way in for nothing. "Ain't going to the fair. Got some business with a guy who works with the carnival."

"Two bucks, please," said the stony-faced man at the gate.

"Have a heart, buddy. In and out in just a few minutes."

"Two bucks, please." This time with a brief shake of the chin.

Harry ran the gamut of excuses without hearing more than, "Two bucks, please," until he gave up and paid.

"Thank you, sir, enjoy the fair."

"Sure, sure, happy to hear you know more than three words," Harry muttered as he hurried into the grounds.

Harry strode up to the nearest booth selling ride and attraction tickets. Twisting her head away from the smoke of the cigarette stuck in one corner of her mouth and speaking from the other corner, the chubby brunette in the booth reached for her ticket reel and said, "Quarteraticketfiveforabuckthirtyforfivebuckswhat'llitbe?"

"Nothing," said Harry, drumming his fingers on the ledge of the ticket window. "Just directions. I'm looking for Boxie. Where's the games?"

"Who's Boxie?" asked the woman. "Say, you a cop?"

"Don't insult me. Looking for Boxie. David Box. Runs the skin games, least he used to."

"Oh, you mean Davey. He manages the sideshows, barks for them. Don't know anything about any games."

"He's here? Great. Where can I find him?"

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"All the way down to the end of the midway, honey," she said, waving a handful of crimson talons in the general direction.

Harry voiced his thanks and took off along the midway. After a few yards he slowed his pace as the environment began to sink in and dozens of cues started to dredge up old feelings. Rides clattering and shuddering. Music, tunes competing from three or four directions. People, sweaty, smiling, riding, eating, drinking, standing in ragged lines. Lots of laughing. Shrieks coming from the rides. Paper and food scraps and drink cups littering the ground, and everywhere peanut shells and pieces of popcorn mashed into the grass by hundreds of feet.

But what always caught Harry, took him back to the carnivals when he was a kid, were the smells. French-fry oil, the rancid tinge evident this late in the day. The deep-fried sugar waffles. The cotton candy, the charcoal-broiled hot dogs. The unique smell of canvas. Broke or not, Harry was suddenly glad to be there.

But as the thought of being broke reminded him of his reason for being there, it also made him wonder what Boxie was doing with the sideshow. For years Boxie had run the games, each one fully as crooked as the next, at least while Boxie ran them. And Boxie had never barked for any attraction, had always kept himself in the background quietly tuning up the games and teaching operators and occasionally stepping into the role of patch, the diplomatic fixer who smoothed things over with the sore losers. Boxie, Harry recalled, especially liked this carnival stop, with the fairgrounds close enough to the city to draw the trade, yet in a separate municipality where certain laws weren't particularly well enforced. Boxie once said that of all the places on the schedule, this was the one where the games could operate wide open and the girly shows could show it all.

Beyond a cluster of battered-looking rides and food and drink booths Harry passed down the center of a double row of game booths. Weaving through the spotty crowd of fairgoers, he drifted from side to side, glancing into the booths. Looked like the same old games, although here and there one had been yanked into the present by modern merchandising, like the ring-toss game where the lined-up prizes in small, medium, and huge sizes were replicas of a currently popular animated movie character.

Along the way Harry caught sight of two or three men in blue uniforms. He wondered why cops would be hanging around there, but he soon noticed that they carried no guns. Out of curiosity he

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drifted close enough to read a uniform's shoulder patch. It bore the name of a local security agency. Rent-a-cops for the fair.

Beyond the games and past another cluster of refreshment booths, the midway opened into a large circular area, effectively a dead end. A number of tents and trailers were arranged around the back half of the circle. Beyond them Harry could see the fence that ended the fairground. Across the center of the crescent of tents and trailers was a platform about forty feet long and perhaps ten feet from front to back, made of collapsible sections. The platform was about four feet high. A row of six eight-foot-tall kerosene torches stood along the rear edge of the platform, their orange flames bending in the breeze.

People were beginning to gather in front of the platform. As Harry approached, a slim young man, more likely an adolescent boy from his size, struggled to heave a large bass drum onto the platform at one end. Following the drum onto the platform, the young man slipped into the instrument's harness, arched his back against its weight, produced a pair of large drum hammers from beneath his belt, and stood ready to strike as he looked in the direction of a short column of people mounting the platform at the opposite end.

The first figure onto the platform, a chunky, bearlike man of medium height, nodded, and the young man walloped one side of the drum for all he was worth. The way the drum moved as it boomed, Harry thought the young drummer might spin himself around, but the youth followed up with a whack on the opposite side and fell into a steady beat.

No later than the fading of the first boom, Harry did a fast double take on the man who gave the nod to the drummer. It was Boxie.

A few pounds heavier, but definitely Boxie. As Boxie strode to the center of the platform and bent to adjust a microphone stand, the people who were following arrayed themselves along the length of the platform on either side of him. Harry smiled at the sight of some of the standards of the old-time carnivals—the fire-eater, not yet aflame, a bundle of small unlit torches in one hand; a bearded lady, one who could almost double as the fat lady; a skinny man in blue tights carrying the Indian clubs of a juggler; an ample, attractive woman in fluorescent green with a huge snake around her neck and twined around her arms; the strongman, a large bullet-headed muscleman in the usual animal-skin outfit (why, Harry wondered fleetingly, was the strongman always bald?); a dwarf in a miniature copy of the strongman's skins, already starting to scamper around

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others making like he was teasing them; and at one end, two dancers from the girly shows in filmy harem costumes.

Harry threaded his way through the thin but growing crowd to the edge of the platform, as close to his acquaintance as he could get. Boxie was literally opening his mouth to address the crowd when Harry stage-whispered, "Boxie! It's me, Harry Belmont!"

Boxie heard, looked down, and saw Harry. Recognition showed in his face. He bobbed his chin slightly at Harry and grabbed the microphone stand. Still stage whispering, Harry said, "Got to see you. Important!"

Boxie nodded again, then leaned over and said: "About fifteen minutes, back there." He nodded toward the left end of the semicircle. "The tent with the three open sides, in front of the office trailer."

Without waiting for a response from Harry, Boxie flipped a switch on the microphone and bellowed, "Ladies and gentlemen, step right up, the Carnival of Wonders is about to thrill you, chill you, shock you, tantalize you, confound you, and astound you! The greatest carnival sideshow still traveling these great United States is here!"

Harry felt a rush of fondness for the long-ago familiar, and he backed up through the crowd to take in the whole platform. The early evening was darkening with clouds and the breeze had picked up. Boxie had swung into his full spiel on the wonders of the Carnival of Wonders. In grey slacks and white dress shirt open at the collar and with cuffs turned up, he looked almost like a businessman who had quickly shed coat and tie. But the businessman image wasn't upheld by his light brown hair, a growing-out brush cut half laid back and sticking out like the quills of a porcupine. His deep voice boomed forth through the sound system. Every third or fourth word came out on a spray of saliva, and he punctuated his points with clenched fists punching the air.

The others on the platform swung into motion as Boxie hyperbolized the marvels of the show. The snake lady swayed with the drum-beat and held the serpent's head out for the crowd to see. The bearded lady rocked and stroked her whiskers. The juggler set his clubs expertly into motion. The fire-eater belched flame. The strongman turned this way and that, flexing his muscles. The dancing girls—beyond mere "girls," Harry could tell, even from his distance—circled around each other doing a few halfhearted bumps to a reedy-sounding melody from nowhere visible that was almost completely obliterated by the drum, which also wiped out a few of Boxie's words. From one to another scampered the dwarf, taunting,

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teasing, mugging, and occasionally falling down. In front of them all, Boxie, his face shining with perspiration, boomed and sprayed his message and punched the air against a backdrop of orange torch flames lying almost flat over in the wind as their flickering tips released threads of black smoke that died as they were born.

For a few minutes Harry completely forgot why he was there.

As Boxie finished and mopped at his forehead with a handkerchief, Harry looked over his shoulder at the tent where they were to meet. He looked back at the platform expecting to see Boxie coming his way, but the figure with the porcupine hair was going away from him, following the performers into a large tent.

Harry hesitated only briefly before starting toward the tent where his old acquaintance told him they would meet. The tent was square, perhaps thirty feet on a side, with the center portion of each of three sides open with flaps tied back. As seen through the nearest opening, there appeared to be one or more tables and some folding chairs in the tent, as well as some cartons and crates stacked against the far wall. As he neared, he saw that the tables held about a dozen neat stacks of paper—they looked like piles of handbills—with each stack weighted down with what looked like a large hardwood tent stake. He saw no sign of life in the tent, so he was surprised when he stepped through the opening to see a large young man who appeared to be unstacking and marking and restacking boxes.

Seen in profile, the youth appeared to be a good-looking, well-muscled young man in his early twenties. Tall, maybe six-four, a full foot above Harry. Deep chest, thick neck, like a well-conditioned football player. Yellow-blond hair that wanted to fall down over his forehead. Strong, square jaw.

The youth looked up from his work, stared at Harry for a few seconds, and said, "Hi. You—uh—looking for someone?"

Harry looked straight into the face of innocence. Despite the youth's size, he might have been wearing altar-boy robes. But the eyes said more than anything else. The eyes of a kid, thought Harry, and not very bright. Or as Harry might have put it, *Nobody home upstairs.*

"Meeting Boxie," said Harry. "David Box. He sent me to this tent."

"Oh. Okay." The young man returned to his cartons.

Harry turned a folding chair so he could sit and watch for Boxie, but by then Boxie was already coming toward the tent. He entered with his hand out to Harry and said, "Hi, Harry, it's been forever. You're looking great."

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"You are too," said Harry, pumping the large moist hand. But he didn't. To Harry, Boxie looked stressed out.

"What brings you here?" asked Boxie. Boxie seemed nervous, his glance moving between the open sides of the tent and briefly coming to rest on what looked to Harry to be a pair of suitcases partially covered by a suit jacket beneath a folding table.

"Boxie, I'm tapped. Like never in my life. I got three bucks and change. I thought of you when I saw the sign for the carnival. I've got to call the dough I loaned you two, three years ago."

The lines in Boxie's unsmiling face deepened. To the young man in the corner he said, "Go do something else for a while, will you, Martin? I got some business with my old friend."

"Sure, Mr. Box." Young Martin squared off the stack he was working on, capped a marking pen, and left the tent.

Boxie's expression didn't increase Harry's hopes for collecting some money. "Harry," Boxie began, "I'm in kind of a tight spot." He glanced from side to side and continued, "I'm pulling out of here tonight, Harry. Only one other person knows that, and she's going with me. But somebody might try to stop us."

Harry's heart sank. "Boxie, I got three bucks and change and not a nickel's worth of prospects until late next week when I can maybe get two, three days of day labor."

"Jeez, Harry, I got to be honest with you, I've got a little over three hundred in my pocket. But that's got to hold two of us until I can get some kind of a job and start earning."

"Job? Leaving the carnival?"

"Forever. Me and Jody. We're going to get married."

"Jody?"

Boxie's face softened. He nodded. "Jody. One of the hootchie-kootchie girls. The two on the stage with me? Jody's the one with the reddish hair, the pretty one."

"A beauty," Harry said, "congratulations." He couldn't remember what either harem girl looked like. "But why not just do it up right? Get married, let them throw you a big bash?"

"A problem named Arnie," said Boxie.

"Husband, significant whatever?"

Boxie shook his head. "Another guy with the show. Ex-boyfriend who wants to be more. He and Jody dated for a while after she joined the show last year, but she found out he's a mean bastard who gets real possessive and jealous. She broke it off when he started slapping her around."

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Harry asked, "You afraid?"

"If it was just me, I'd extinguish the jerk like a paper match. I'm afraid mostly for Jody," said Boxie. "He's threatened us both, but he told her more than once that if he couldn't have her, he'd fix her so nobody could. Since we found each other we've been sneaking around, but he's getting wise." Again Boxie's eyes darted from side to side. "Got one more show tonight, then we're pulling out. We might not be missed in the confusion of tearing down tomorrow morning. Hoping by the time they know we're gone we'll have had twelve, eighteen hours or so to get lost in town."

"Maybe I can help you in town," said Harry. Returning to his reason for seeking out Boxie, he added, "I could sure use a few bucks. Even twenty or thirty. But I can understand why you can't cough up a whole lot just now."

Boxie pulled out a well-worn wallet and counted out two twenties and a ten. "I can let you have fifty now, and I'll get you the rest as soon as I can." He smiled and added, "With luck I'll be in the same town for a long time, so I should be easier to catch up with."

As Harry was rebuttoning his wallet pocket, Boxie pulled a handful of singles out of his right pants pocket. "Here, I can let you have this too. Should be seven or eight here. Hell, I ought to give you everything I've got. I know that what you gave me back when I was screwed up was most of what you had."

Harry started to take out his wallet again but stopped and instead folded the singles together and slipped them into his shirt pocket. He looked down at the tent's grassy floor and waved away Boxie's comment. "I could never hang onto a buck, anyway."

Then Harry looked up and said, "You got a place to go? You and Jody?"

"No. Figure on a nice cheap hotel."

"My place," said Harry. "You can lay low there a couple days."

"You got a place of your own?"

Harry nodded, "Yeah, but it ain't much. Little three-room basement apartment. When you see it you'll know why I get it free in return for taking care of the grounds." He looked around the tent. "Got a pencil? Something to write on?"

Boxie bobbed his chin toward the table as he produced a short ballpoint pen. "Grab a handbill."

Harry lifted the nearest tent stake and picked up one of the papers. He briefly hefted the stake. "Heavy. You tying down elephants around here?"

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Boxie smiled. "Lots of heavy tents and lots of guy wires."

"Hey, Dave." Harry and Boxie looked up to see the youth who manned the bass drum. "Dave, the boss wants to see you before your last show." The youth looked from Boxie to Harry, his eyes lingering on the stake in Harry's hand.

"Okay, Billy, just a few minutes."

The youth departed. Harry returned the stake to its place and turned his attention to the back of the handbill. Flattening the sheet on the table, he wrote his address and briefly described the way to get there. Boxie was folding the sheet and putting it into his pocket when Harry, looking past Boxie through the tent's open side, saw a man in a blue jogging suit and sneakers coming their way. The man was carrying a clipboard of papers.

Boxie said, "Thanks, Harry. We'll probably get there sometime during the night. That okay?"

"That's okay. I better get out of your hair now. See you later." Harry turned to leave, then turned back and said, "Just one thing. The games. All the years I've known you, you've been skinning suckers with the games. You get religion or something?" Harry grinned at Boxie.

Boxie looked momentarily surprised. He hesitated just a second or two before replying, "I guess maybe I did, Harry. I didn't want to cheat people anymore."

A couple of more see-you-laters and the man in the blue jogging suit came through one side of the tent as Harry stepped out the opposite side.

Harry, busy trying to decide why the man with the clipboard looked familiar, was half backing out of the tent when he collided with object or person unknown so solidly the impact jarred him from head to toe and nearly knocked him over. Harry muttered, "Damn!"

A large hand grabbed his arm and steadied him and a voice he had heard only recently apologized profusely if awkwardly. It was the large blond young man who had been at work in the tent, the one Boxie called Martin.

"Gee, I'm sorry, sir," the young man said for the seventh or eighth time, "I didn't watch where I was going. Sorry."

Harry glared up at Martin. A face of absolute innocence looked down. "It's okay," said Harry. "Just watch where you're going, will you?"

"You okay, Harry?" He turned to see Boxie at the flap of the tent. The man in the blue jogging suit stood to one side and slightly behind Boxie.

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"Yeah, okay."

"My fault," said Martin. "Clumsy."

Boxie said, "Martin, go tell the boss I'll be along in a little bit."

"Yessir." Martin moved off in long strides. Harry watched him go, thinking that the youth had *country* written all over him.

Harry started back up the midway. Now out from under the immediate pressure of near-zero resources, he felt relaxed, in fact he felt pretty good. He'd always liked the carnival. He thought he'd stick around awhile, even take in some of the fair exhibits and maybe catch Boxie's last show. But first, food.

A few minutes later Harry was juggling a foot-long chili dog and large paper cup of cola. The number of one-dollar bills in his shirt pocket had been reduced by half.

He wandered slowly along the midway, eating and drinking and scoping out a few attractions he thought he might look into when his hands were free.

As he crossed from one side of the midway to the other he happened to look back in the direction of the sideshow. Through the thinning crowd he saw what appeared to be some commotion at the tent where he'd left Boxie. Four or five carnival-costumed people were clustered outside the tent. Someone screamed, then screamed again. Two uniformed security guards jogged toward the scene and a number of other people hurried in that direction.

Harry wolfed down the last of the chili dog, shifted the cola to his right hand, and started toward the activity. He was perhaps halfway there when the man in the blue jogging suit stepped out in front of the group at the tent and pointed down the midway at Harry, yelling, "That's the guy! Him—the little curly-haired guy. He killed Davey! Somebody grab him!"

It seemed to Harry that all at once a dozen people, half in performing dress, suddenly took off running in his direction as if each had vowed to get there first. With no more than a split second's hesitation Harry dropped the cola and turned and ran.

Or started to run. He hadn't taken the third step when something struck the right side of his head and bolts of lightning bounced between his temples and he went sailing into a nearly complete forward roll and landed flat on his back. Crisscrossing strings of multicolored overhead lights faded to black.

The next internal dialogue began:

Q. *A snake. A* big, big *snake. About to swallow me?*

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A. *No, dummy, remember the woman on stage with Boxie? Wearing the snake? If it hasn't eaten her it ain't going to eat you.*
Q. *But am I still in trouble?*
A. *Big, big trouble, Harry. Better get up off your back and start trying to squirm your way out of this one.*

Harry rolled his head to one side and opened his eyes a cautious slit and carefully searched the space above him out of the corners of his eyes, as though creeping up on something unpleasant might somehow make it less unpleasant. The snake was there, but now farther away. The snake lady was standing. Several other people, some Harry had seen with the sideshow and a number of others he didn't recognize, were looking down at him. Except for the snake lady, who looked mostly worried or distressed, most of those around him looked ready to help feed him to the snake.

Harry struggled to sit up. His slacks were ripped at the right knee. His shirt was pulled out of his slacks, and he had lost the two bottommost buttons.

From behind him: "Still think I ought to whack him again."

Harry squirmed around in his sitting position to discover that the snarling voice came from the juggler who had been on the platform with Boxie. Three slender Indian clubs dangled from the frowning man's hands.

"For goodness sake, Angelo, you could have killed him throwing a club like that." This from the snake lady.

Angelo grinned smugly and said, "I threw it to clip him and I just clipped him. If I'd wanted to kill him I'd have hit him squarely."

The snake lady, whom Angelo called Giselle, and Angelo himself reached down to help Harry to his feet, she with a firm, gentle hand and he as if he wanted Harry's arm to pull loose. Harry suddenly found himself flanked by a pair of security guards who steered him back toward the open tent. One guard said to the other, "Cops should be here in a few minutes." Harry took this to indicate that he hadn't been unconscious for long.

The second guard said, "There's usually a sheriff's unit by the main gate. What happened?"

"Accident call," said the other.

Harry was shaky on his feet as the two guards brought him to a stop at the tent. He could see inside where Boxie's form lay crumpled half on its side. Someone had lain a suitcoat over Boxie's face. To Harry it looked like the coat he had seen draped over the suitcases

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under the table. On the ground near Boxie's form sat a white first-aid box.

Nearby were the two dancing girls from the platform, the one with reddish hair weeping softly and being comforted by the other. Jody, thought Harry. Taking her in for the first time, he agreed with Boxie; she was pretty. Forty or so, but a nice face, what he could see, and a decent figure even with the little soft roll of tummy that topped the harem trousers.

"What in hell is going on here?" Harry demanded. "And what happened to my friend?" Fingers tightened on both of Harry's arms.

One figure separated itself from the small group and turned to Harry. It was the man in the blue jogging suit. He strode forward and swung his open right hand and caught Harry full across the cheek. The blow resounded with a crack. "This is the guy. I saw him in the tent with Davey not fifteen minutes ago. We ought to break his legs for him."

Giselle said, "Take it easy, Arnie, the police will be here soon."

Arnie? What was it Boxie had said: *A problem named Arnie.* That instant Harry recognized the costume under the half-open jacket of the jogging suit and recalled Boxie talking about Arnie: *If it was just me, I'd extinguish the jerk like a paper match.* No wonder Arnie looked familiar. He was the fire-eater. And now he had killed Boxie and was hanging it on Harry.

Arnie announced to the crowd of mostly carnival employees, "Bashed Davey with a tent peg. Caved in his head. Billy," Arnie turned to a youth in the group, "you tell them what you saw."

Billy was, of course, the boy who had brought Boxie a message while Harry was present. Looking from Arnie to Harry and back, and apparently scared half out of his wits, Billy said, "I went to tell Davey that Mr. Collins wanted to see him. This man—" he nodded toward Harry "—was there. And he had one of those big pegs in his hand."

An angry murmur ran through the group. Harry said, "Hey, come off it! Boxie was my friend. I knew him eighteen, twenty years. I left him awhile ago, he was standing and breathing like always. And this guy—" Harry motioned toward Arnie "—was just coming in the other side of the tent. This jerk clubbed Boxie and he's setting me up!"

Arnie snarled, "Goddamn liar!" To the group he said, "I look in the far side of the tent awhile ago and here's this curly-haired shrimp standing next to Davey with this big tent peg in his hand. Exactly

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what Billy saw. Then a few minutes later I come into the tent and there's Davey with his head split and this guy's sauntering down the midway eating hot dogs!"

The murmur in the group became more of a growl. Somebody said, "The cops should be here any minute."

Angelo the juggler said, "Why don't we let this guy run? In fact, make him run? I'll bring him down and pay him off with one toss." He flipped an Indian club in his right hand.

Giselle said, "Angelo!"

Arnie made a chuckling sound. "Good idea."

Harry wrested his arms free of the two fairground rent-a-cops. One tried to grab him again but the other said, "Leave him be. He can't go anywhere."

Harry spread his hands and whirled around once, taking in the entire group. "You people all nuts? This guy here—" again indicating Arnie "—iced my friend. Your friend. *Our* friend. And he did it over a woman."

Another murmur. Harry caught sight of two or three heads turning partly in the direction of the softly weeping Jody.

"Enough talk," said Arnie. "Come on, Angelo, we'll lock him in one of the trailers until the cops get here."

"Keep your hands off me," Harry said menacingly as the two moved toward him.

Then someone said, "Wait. This man didn't hurt Mr. Box." Seven or eight people looked at each other as if to say, "Was that you?"

Giselle said, "Was that you, Curly Sam?" The skin-clad strongman (and why were half the bald men in the world called Curly?) answered, "Not me."

"Then who?"

"Me. It was me." The response came timidly, haltingly, from behind Curly Sam. A few people on the inner edge of the group parted to reveal a person they could already partly see because of his height. The blond youth called Martin.

Seeing the good-looking youth with the blank expression brought the collision just outside of the tent back to Harry in a rush. Practically bouncing on his toes, Harry pointed at the youth and said, "See! See? This kid knows. I bumped into him just outside the tent and we both saw Boxie and this, this guy—Arnie—standing there in the tent."

Arnie growled, "Come on, Angelo, let's lock this jerk away. What the hell does the dummy know, anyway?"

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Martin's face froze in an expression of pain, but Harry, noticing the ripple of muscles in the young man's upper arms and shoulders, thought that even if the kid wasn't a rocket scientist it wouldn't make sense to get him angry.

Angelo said, "Wait a minute."

Arnie, his face reddening, yelled, "This outsider's a killer. We've got to take care of him."

Strongman Curly Sam took a step toward Arnie and said, "Wait a minute. Let the kid talk."

Angelo narrowed his eyes at Martin and said, "Give. Why should we believe you?"

The young man looked once around the circle of faces and said, "Like he said, I slammed into this gentleman and darn near knocked him over. Mr. Box and Mr. Arnold were standing together right near us, just inside the tent. They were still there when this man walked away."

Giselle looked across the open space at Harry, and in her soothing voice asked, "What's your name, sir, what do we call you?"

Harry was wondering if she was always so kindly when he heard someone grumble, "Giselle, do you always have to be everyone's mother?"

"I'm Harry. Harry Belmont."

Angelo said to Martin, "Not good enough, kid. Why should we believe you?"

Harry was surprised at how uncomfortable young Martin had become, how he seemed to squirm within his skin at the attention he was receiving. As if he thoroughly regretted having stepped forward.

"Because I saw Mr. Box and Mr. Arnold together just like I said. And I saw Mr. Belmont walk away." The words fell lamely on the group. The young man was visibly distressed and his forehead shone with sweat.

"Martin," Giselle clucked sympathetically.

"Cut the bull," snapped Arnie. "Away with this guy!"

"No, please," said Martin. "I know what I saw and when I saw it because—" he reached into his pants pocket and brought out a flat, dark object nearly hidden in his large hand "—because I rammed into Mr. Belmont so I could take his wallet." He held up the wallet.

Harry's left hand flew to his hip pocket and found nothing. "You little crook," he snapped.

"Sorry," said Martin, "real sorry."

Giselle said, "Why, Martin?"

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The youth looked surprised. "For the money. I saw Mr. Box give Mr. Belmont some money that he put in his wallet. And some more—looked like just some singles—that he put in his shirt pocket. So I took the wallet and now I'm in trouble. But Mr. Belmont was in bigger trouble, and I *did* see Mr. Box and Mr. Arnold together and Mr. Belmont never went back in the tent."

"Cops are here," someone said quietly. A sheriff's car and an ambulance were parting the thinning crowd and threading their way along the midway toward them.

Giselle asked, "Why would Arnie hurt Davey?"

Curly Sam suddenly pointed inside the tent and boomed, "Why doesn't somebody ask *him?*"

All heads spun in the direction Sam had indicated. Someone cursed. A woman screamed. There on the grass in the tent, suit coat still draped over his head, Boxie was sitting up.

Harry glared at Arnie. Arnie spent only a split second glaring back before he spun around and leaped for the edge of the circle, elbowing people out of the way, and broke into a run. He hadn't hit his stride when the dwarf in the miniature strongman suit came seemingly out of nowhere and threw himself at the running man's legs. Arnie went down in a heap and rolled. Already winding up to throw, Angelo let the Indian club drop to his side as he muttered, "Damnit, *I* could have brought him down easy."

Curly Sam was standing over Arnie when the sheriff's department took over.

An hour later Harry was again on his own. Boxie had left in the ambulance, Jody at his side. Probable skull fracture, outlook uncertain, but a pretty good chance of complete recovery, at least according to the emergency medical technicians.

Harry had told his story to the police and had been given an appointment for the next day for a complete statement. One deputy was stern with Harry about making sure he showed so they wouldn't have to bring him in. Harry shrugged off the deputy's attitude—being a little Kojaky, Harry described it—and promised to show. Hell, he was as familiar with police stations as he was with carnivals.

Arnie had been taken away. Almost everyone in the sideshow was being lined up for statements. Few, it seemed, had more than some vague notion of Arnie's now-apparent obsessive love for Jody.

Harry agreed not to pursue a pickpocketing charge against young Martin, partly because of his lifelong aversion to some forms of law

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enforcement and partly because Giselle, her snake weaving just inches away from Harry, sweetly reminded him that Martin saved Harry a lot of grief by admitting to picking his pocket.

Darkness had settled over the fairgrounds. It had been less than two hours since the foot-long chili dog, but Harry felt ravenously hungry. But no more chili dogs. In fact, he wanted nothing more than to escape the sights and smells of the carnival. Pizza would do nicely, maybe with a cold beer.

Thinking again of his nearly empty gas tank, as Harry approached the gate to the parking area he saw a familiar figure leaning against the fence. Cheap suitcase on the ground beside him, young Martin looked blankly out at the world.

Martin noticed Harry as the distance closed between them. Harry stopped. For perhaps ten seconds, neither said anything. Finally Harry said, "I never felt the wallet go. And the pocket was buttoned."

"Sorry, Mr. Belmont."

"Don't give me this *Mister* stuff. My name's Harry."

"Belmont don't fit you, anyway. You look *Eye*-talian."

"For all I know I might be *Eye*-talian," mocked Harry. "Belmont's the name I got from the man who raised me."

"Oh. Named you after himself," Martin concluded.

Harry replied, "No. Named me after his favorite racetrack. What about you? Martin. First name, last name?"

"Last. I'm Melvin Martin."

"Melvin?"

The youth nodded. "At home they called me Dink."

"Dink?"

"For Dinky. I was the runt of the litter."

Harry considered the youth's large frame. "I'd hate to tangle with *your* family."

Looking down at the suitcase, Harry asked, "Going somewhere?"

"Yeah. I got fired."

"Fired? For—?"

Dink nodded. "For taking your wallet. That's a rule about anyone caught stealing on the grounds."

Harry asked, "Where you going?"

"Into town, I guess. Find a place to sleep. Look for work tomorrow."

After a slight hesitation Harry said, "Come on, I'll give you a ride to town."

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The youth grabbed up his suitcase. "Thanks, Mr. Bel— Harry."

On the way to his car Harry said, "I'll drop you at a place where you can get a cheap night's sleep. If you can keep your hands out of my pockets, that is." Dink looked suddenly downcast.

Harry felt that his reference to pockets had plunged the youth into a deep gloom. Feeling slightly guilty, but not really knowing why—Harry Belmont didn't give a damn for anyone but himself, just ask him—Harry said, "You want to split a pizza, kid?"

Dink brightened. "You'd take me with you?"

"Sure," said Harry, "as long as you got half the price. I know this place that makes the greatest pizza. See, the secret's in the crust, and this guy—"

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a *NEW* short story by

ROBERT CAMPBELL

Edgar winner Robert Campbell has received considerable acclaim for his depictions of life in big-city America. His Jimmy Flannery series takes readers to the neighborhoods of Irish Catholic Chicago; his LaLa Land books provide a trip through the mean streets of L.A. The following story is about as far from those creative habitats as he could get, for we meet his protagonist this time in an English village, among the upper classes . . .

SOUVENIR DE MME. H. THURET

by ROBERT CAMPBELL

David Greening, cottager, in his garden on a morning in early autumn, savoring the scent of loam and manure, aware of the sun upon his back, the scrape of trowel in earth; utterly content.

When he heard the voice, David Greening looked up from the hole he was digging to accommodate the Golden Ducat daffodil and felt his heart stand still at the sight of the woman at the gate.

Her hand was laid upon it as though she'd meant to walk right in and then had thought better of it. The pose lent her slender figure an attitude of vibrancy. He saw the larger impression that she made, but it was the shape of her hair blown somewhat about her face and the eyes that were clearly gray, even at a distance, and the mouth, generous and vulnerable, that fit so completely the portrait of the imaginary woman who had haunted Greening's dreams for many years.

"Please," called the vision, "I don't wish to intrude, but . . ."

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She hesitated, swaying slightly as though faint.

Greening was on his feet and hurrying down the path as she tottered and seemed about to crumple.

". . . but I'm afraid my husband has been killed."

It was then Greening saw that the hand that had not lain upon the top of his garden gate was red with blood.

"Will you have another cup of tea, another tot of brandy?" asked Greening with a certain offhanded hospitality which did not cater to her emotional fragility or do anything to upset with excessive compassion the delicate balance of her command of self.

It was as though she was a neighbor come to call on him, though he was a comparative newcomer to the village of Pummery, retired to the tiny country cottage and garden after many years in London, only the year before.

She'd removed her jacket and while she'd used the lavatory to wash the blood from her hands, he'd sponged the stains on the sleeve (though failing to remove it all) and had it draped over a kitchen chair before the fire to dry.

"So early in the afternoon? I think not," she said, accepting the role he'd given her, pretending for the moment that her visit was no more than social, postponing the inevitable storm of feeling that would accompany her explication of the tragedy when the police should arrive.

He regarded her with quiet intensity but did not remark upon the bruises she'd covered with rouge and powder. Still, his scrutiny disturbed her more than a bit, and she reached down to touch a miniature gray poodle who had none of the nervousness of the smaller breeds, as though seeking comfort from it.

"I went to Fidelia first, but she wasn't at home," she said in a lovely, husky voice. "I couldn't think for the moment where else to go and found myself growing faint."

"Mrs. Enkworth is a relative?"

"Just my oldest and dearest friend in Pummery."

"I haven't seen you visiting."

"We've been away, my husband and I, for more than a year, and Fidelia tells me you've only just settled in permanently though you've been a weekender and summer holiday visitor for five or six years."

"Fidelia speaks of me?"

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"Fidelia speaks of everyone," she said, smiling. "You must know that. She's most curious about who you are and what you were before retiring here."

"How I made my living?"

"I'm not sure she'd admit to being as rude as all that," she said, "but it would certainly make her happier if she could place you in your proper slot, Mr. Greening."

"David, if you'd rather," he said. "I haven't asked your name."

"Hawkhurst. Mrs. Malcolm Hawkhurst. Madelaine, if you will. And this is Souvenir."

"Souvenir de Mme. H. Thuret," murmured Greening.

The little dog lifted its head at the mention of its name.

"I beg your pardon," said Madelaine.

"Your two names together form the name of a rose. A very beautiful rose," said Greening.

Madelaine blushed and Souvenir cocked its little head, then perked its ears as a knock sounded at the front door, which was no more than two or three arm's lengths from where they sat.

Madelaine Hawkhurst started as though she'd taken a blow, and Souvenir, sensitive to his mistress's every mood, whined a bit until she soothed it with another touch.

"Will that be the police?" asked Madelaine.

Greening laid a steadying hand upon her shoulder as he went to the door.

Fidelia Enkworth stood there looking up at him, blue eyes peering out of a face that seemed not to have lost its childish innocence, yet displaying the wisdom gained only by long life and much experience.

"This is not how I planned your introduction to Madelaine," said Fidelia. "How awful."

"You know about it?" exclaimed Greening, not really altogether surprised.

"It's all over the High Street. A tradesman, Jack Ewen, the baker, passing by, heard the shot but went on his way. Then he thought better of it and went back to the manor house to see if anything was amiss. The front door was wide open and no one answered his halloo, so he went in and saw what he saw. Then he hurried to the police station, declaring his discovery all along the way."

"I've called in as well," said Greening.

"Yes, well, the police should be along any minute now," she said, slipping past him and going to her knees in front of Madelaine; reaching out to embrace and comfort her.

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"Don't baby me, Fidelia," said Madelaine. "I'm only just holding on."

"Well, perhaps you shouldn't. Stiff upper lips are for fools. Wouldn't you say, Greeny?"

"No doubt tears can help on occasion, but there's much to be done and steady might well serve Mrs. Hawkhurst better until it's over."

Fidelia huffed and got to her feet, glancing at Greening as though he'd somehow betrayed her trust by not supporting her opinion.

Then the police, in the bodies of Detective Sergeant Sunderland and Constable Wiggins, appeared at the still-open door.

"Mr. Greening. Mrs. Enkworth. Mrs. Hawkhurst," said Sunderland, as though counting them out for a parlor game.

"Detective Sergeant Sunderland," said Fidelia, matching exactly his tone of voice.

"Shall we return to the manor, Mrs. Hawkhurst, or would you rather we repaired to the station house for your statement?"

"Can you take my statement here?"

"You've no objection to an audience?" asked Sunderland, casting a dubious glance at Fidelia in reference to her reputation as village gossip.

"I'd rather my friends were here to witness what I have to say."

"Very well, then," said Sunderland, taking the chair opposite, which had been occupied by Greening, after obtaining permission with a glance.

Fidelia pulled up a footstool and sat at Madelaine's feet. Greening went to stand on the hearth, and Wiggins stood by the door after closing it.

They made a crowd in the tiny sitting room.

"Now, then," said Sunderland, after removing his hat, "in your own time and in your own way, if you please, ma'am."

"I know so little," said Madelaine. "I'd just finished dressing to take Souvenir for a long walk. I'd asked Malcolm—my husband?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I'd asked him if he'd like to come along. Our first day in the country after a year on the Continent. He said he'd rather not. He wanted to clean his guns in readiness for a shoot. It was the principal reason for our returning in autumn. We usually opened the house for weekends late in spring, resided here a month in summer, and weekended again in autumn until the shooting was done. That was why we had no staff, the house lying empty the rest of the year."

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"Were you intending to bring staff from elsewhere, or were you going to hire locally?" asked Sunderland.

"We intended to bring our housekeeper-cook from London, but she'd taken ill. I knew that I could manage for a few weeks without help except for Mrs. Wiggins . . ." She looked at the constable and smiled. ". . . who's helped out with the cooking when we've had large affairs and who we hoped would lend a hand on the weekends until our own cook recovered."

"But she'd not yet arrived?"

"She was to have come before suppertime today but it was early still."

"Ah. So you were alone with Mr. Hawkhurst in the house?"

"As far as I know. Except for Souvenir, of course."

"That little dog?"

Souvenir had lifted his head at the sound of his name once more.

"So you were on your way out," said Sunderland, prompting her to go on.

"I was walking down the central staircase, putting on my gloves. Souvenir ran ahead and darted into my husband's study."

"Your husband called him?"

"No. My husband had very little to do with Souvenir. He didn't like pets around the house and merely tolerated my dog to indulge my desire for a companion. He only allowed me to keep him when I promised to train Souvenir to a rare perfection of obedience. My husband made fun of Souvenir all the same. He tolerated hunting dogs kept in kennels because they were useful to him, but even so he used local packs and kept none of his own."

"It's often the case," said Greening, diffidently, "that dogs and cats favor persons who seem openly to dislike them and want nothing to do with them. Was this the case with Souvenir and Mr. Hawkhurst?"

"How did you know that?" asked Madelaine, quite impressed.

"Why else would the little dog have gone into your husband's study unsummoned? Either he wanted a goodbye from Mr. Hawkhurst or there was something or somebody else in the room that excited his curiosity."

Sunderland stood up as though Greening had asked his own last questions. "Mrs. Hawkhurst, I'm sure you've heard it asked a thousand times on telly mysteries," he said. "The reason it's become such a cliché is that it is, indeed, asked at least once in every homicide investigation."

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"Yes?" said Madelaine.

"Do you know of anyone who had reason to hate your husband so deeply as to act to cause his death?"

Color flooded her face, rising from the neck of her blouse in a becoming rush, as though he'd paid her an improper but not altogether displeasing compliment. She turned her head away in some confusion and raised her hand as though to hide her face. When she turned to him again, she was quite recovered.

"There were a good many people who hated my husband, and not a few who would have conspired to kill him had they the opportunity."

"Then the next question must necessarily follow," said Sunderland. "To your certain knowledge, can you say that no one but yourself, your husband, and, of course, your little dog, was in the house this afternoon?"

"I would not swear to it," said Madelaine Hawkhurst.

"I was curious," said Greening, peering through the open French doors to the Hawkhurst study. "Am I trespassing on a crime scene?"

"Why do you call it that?" asked Sunderland.

"You asked certain questions about intruders in the house."

"Routine."

"And did not ask certain other questions."

"Such as?"

"You said nothing about the bruises on Mrs. Hawkhurst's face. She'd done her best to conceal them with makeup but they were plain to see all the same."

"Come sit down, Mr. Greening. Let me turn on some lamps and we'll have a chat."

Greening carefully walked around the welter still left on the large leather chair in the center of the room, though Hawkhurst's body had long since been taken away, and sat down at one end of a matching leather couch.

"I didn't ask about the bruising because I already knew the cause of it. Hawkhurst drank and had a bad temper to boot. Apparently he sometimes took it out on his wife."

"You'd been called out on disturbances before?"

"Never, but I'd been given word by Dr. Crowstairs, who'd treated her more than once for . . . accidents, she called them. Has Fidelia Enkworth told you nothing about it?"

"Fidelia's a notorious gossip, I know," said Greening, "but I would bet a packet on her loyalty and discretion in all important and private matters concerning friends."

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"Well, the cat's well out of the bag and wailing now," said Sunderland. "Give it time, and I'm sure we'll discover one of two things."

"And they are?"

"That Madelaine Hawkhurst finally had enough and either hired her husband's murderer or blew his head off herself whilst he slept."

"Sunderland's not quite a fool," said Fidelia. "Neither is he overzealous, but he's wrong in accusing Madelaine, and we must do all we can to prove it. You will put all your considerable wit and intelligence to work on it, and I will do what little I can."

"How's that?" remarked Greening, clearly startled at her excessive praise of him.

"You won't tell me, I know—sworn to secrecy, I've no doubt—but I would not be surprised to discover that you were, in the past, a member of one of the intelligence services."

"Really!" said Greening, amused and dismayed.

"Oh yes, you have the professional's way of deflecting inquiries about yourself."

"Really, Fidelia, you do have the most outrageous fancies."

"Be that as it may, you will do what you can, won't you? I thought you displayed a more than ordinary interest in Madelaine."

He felt color rushing to his own cheeks. Had he really been so transparent, or was Fidelia merely firing shots at random?

"Of course I'll help, if I can," he said.

When he went to visit Madelaine Hawkhurst three days hence, the day following Hawkhurst's interment in the village churchyard, Greening was wearing his Irish crush hat against the light rain that was falling and carried a walking stick to insure his footing on the wet leaves.

Madelaine was not at the manor house but had removed herself to a little garden folly that was fitted out as a self-contained guesthouse.

"This cottage suits me better than that cold house," she said, as she greeted him at the door. "It's about the size of your own little dwelling, is it not?"

"But mine is not as charming."

"I think it very charming indeed."

"Thank you for saying so," said Greening, inordinately pleased, but embarrassed by the compliment all the same. "Fidelia would have me redecorate."

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"Fidelia has no one of her own to care for, so she picks up . . ."

"You were going to say strays, were you?" said Greening.

"I was going to include myself, I assure you. Will you have a cup of tea?"

"I think that will go down well."

"Please sit down."

Greening took a small overstuffed chair beside the fire, removed his hat and shook the drops off onto the hearth, then cupped it on his knee.

"I can put up your hat and walking stick," said Madelaine.

"I'm comfortable with them as they are," he said, settling himself with his hands placed one on top of the other and his chin on top of both propped up on the head of his walking stick.

She smiled without further encouragement and gave her attention to the kettle and pot.

"Where's your little dog? Where's Souvenir?"

"In the kitchen in the main house, with the cook."

"Mrs. Wiggins?"

"Yes, the constable's wife. She's been very kind and helpful. I take my meals there, though she's offered to bring them to me here on a tray. Will you stay for supper? I'm sure Mrs. Wiggins's pot roast can accommodate one more."

"That's a very tempting offer to an old bachelor," said Greening, soliciting another compliment which was not long in coming.

"Surely not old. One would say attractively mature," said Madelaine, gifting him with a dazzling smile.

There was a scratching at the door.

"Souvenir," she said, "come to call me in to supper."

"What a clever bit he is," said Greening, as she opened the door to let the little dog in.

"He's learned a dozen tricks or more. I'm sure he understands everything we say."

The little poodle, tongue happily lolling from its mouth after its scamper down the path, through the garden, and across the grounds from house to cottage, rushed at Greening and jumped up and down, clawing at the walking stick.

"Behave, Souvenir, behave," commanded Madelaine, scarcely raising her voice, and the dog immediately stopped his leaping about and went to ground near her foot, waiting for a praising pat.

Greening's eyes met Madelaine's and she read his thoughts.

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"He's usually such a calm little animal," said Madelaine, "but that jumping at anyone holding a stick is a habit of which he will not be broken."

"Is it something he learned all on his own, then?"

"Oh, quite alone," said Madelaine and never dropped her eyes.

After a fine and simple meal taken in the kitchen, with Mrs. Wiggins gone to her own home and hearth, they sat over cups of Sumatran coffee laced with Devon cream before the fire in the parlor. Not the sitting room where Hawkhurst had met his tragic end, but another room that was most obviously her own.

Souvenir sat beside his mistress, his head in her lap as she idly stroked him.

"How are you bearing up?" asked Greening.

"There are strains and tensions. Keeping up appearances."

"I think I understand."

"Yes, I think you do. You notice things, David. The first time you laid eyes on me I think you knew my husband abused me."

Greening waved his hand in demur, as though reluctant to be the confidant of her private life.

"It's always been an open secret in the village, though I pretended few were aware of my condition."

"Why did you remain with him?"

"The properties and fortune were mine," she said. "I lived a privileged and sheltered life before meeting Malcolm. One might say that I'd existed in a time warp, a creature of another age. Malcolm Hawkhurst came highly recommended by my father and I married him without much hesitation or protest. After my father's death, Malcolm moved to make my property his own, and before I knew it, he had control of it and me. Were I to have left him, I would have been penniless, thrown out into the street with nothing but the clothes on my back."

Greening could not escape the notion that she was telling him a Victorian tale, overselling it more than a little. Still, that might have been—probably was—a substitute for the greater truth, that she had feared Hawkhurst's violence so greatly that she was willing to suffer some of it rather than risk the worst of which he might be capable. In this day and age, for an intelligent, educated woman to allow herself to be so abused and terrified might well be a humiliation too bitter to be endured.

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"So, you see, when you ask how well I'm faring," she went on, "and I reply that there are strains and tensions, I mean only those that attend my position in the society in which I find myself. Were you to ask what I felt about my husband's death, I would say that I was much relieved, having been given back my life."

The challenge in her glance that said he must judge her if he would, the candor with which she regarded him with her clear gray eyes, squeezed Greening's heart. Were such a woman his, how he would keep and cherish her. Yet that was the very thing she did not need, another protector. What she needed was time and space enough to find herself.

"I think you have every right to rejoice," said Greening.

"Not rejoice. I am simply grateful to have it at an end," said Madelaine gravely.

The bell at the front door sounded.

They both started as though intruders had come upon them during an act of the utmost intimacy.

Madelaine got to her feet, sending Souvenir leaping to the floor, and hurried from the room, Souvenir at her heels.

She was back in moments with Detective Sergeant Sunderland in tow.

"Will you have a coffee or a brandy, Sergeant?" asked Madelaine.

"I'll only stay a moment," said Sunderland, nodding to Greening and no doubt noting for the future the comfortable domestic scene.

"You need more help with your inquiries?" asked Madelaine.

"We've had no luck at all finding anyone who saw a person or persons near the manor on the day and time of your husband's death. In a village as small as Pummery, there's rarely a move anyone can make without someone noticing."

"I've already said that I believed no one to be anywhere about," said Madelaine.

"I know you did. Still I hoped to find some visitor or trespasser."

His meaning was very clear. If there had been no one else about, then clearly Madelaine Hawkhurst was the only likely suspect, Sunderland apparently having ruled out suicide as a most unlikely cause of death.

"I came to inquire if you meant to return to London or to go elsewhere any time soon?" said Sunderland.

"Am I not to be allowed?" asked Madelaine.

"Not at all. You're under no restraint. But I would ask that you keep me informed of your whereabouts, if you please."

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"Are you saying that Mrs. Hawkhurst is not quite on but not quite off the hook?" asked Greening.

They both looked at him as though he'd said something unforgivably rude, though there was the hint of a smile on Madelaine's soft lips at his rough audacity.

"Because if that's the case, I'd like to try an experiment that may settle the matter to your satisfaction once and for all," continued Greening. "If you would be so kind as to sit here, where I've been sitting."

Sunderland sat in the chair which Greening that moment vacated.

Greening handed Sunderland his walking stick, which had been lying on the side table beside his coffee cup.

"Will you hold it upright between your legs, one hand on top of the head and the other where you will?"

Sunderland placed his hands one on top of the other on the head of the walking stick as Greening scooped up Souvenir and went to the door.

"Just sit there as you are and watch what happens when I open the door again and set the dog down on the rug."

He popped out of sight and closed the door. Madelaine stood by the fire. Sunderland sat stock-still, waiting. The door opened and Greening set Souvenir down.

The little dog rushed at once to Sunderland and danced about the walking stick, scraping at it with his forepaws.

In came Greening. "And there you have him, Detective Sergeant, the culprit who pulled the trigger while Hawkhurst was cleaning his shotgun, butt-first upon the rug."

There were many more holes to be dug, the bottoms sprinkled with bone meal, the bulbs in papery gowns placed just so at the proper depth, four to seven inches for most varieties.

Greening was on his knees contemplating the attention a simple hole so often required, a cup of nothingness waiting to be filled.

"Well, Greeny, she's gone away," Fidelia chirped above his head.

Greening glanced up to see Fidelia peering over the fence, her blue eyes nearly obscured by the tulle mushroom hat she wore while gardening. She would be standing on tiptoe on a paving block to get a better view of him.

"Gone away?" he said, rising reluctantly to his feet and adjusting his kneeling pads.

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"Don't play Old Dog Tray with me. You know perfectly well that Madelaine Hawkhurst's left for London."

"Yes, I do know," said Greening.

"Will you miss her much?"

"I scarcely know her."

"Well, you've seen enough of her of late. She's told me that she finds you very comforting."

"Oh? I've been the subject of conversations, have I?"

"Nothing too revealing, Greeny, not to worry. Just she feels you've done her a marvelous service."

"I merely pointed out to Detective Sergeant Sunderland how Mr. Hawkhurst's unfortunate death may have come about."

"You don't really believe an experienced hunter like Hawkhurst cleaned his shotguns muzzle up with the breech unbroken?" said Fidelia.

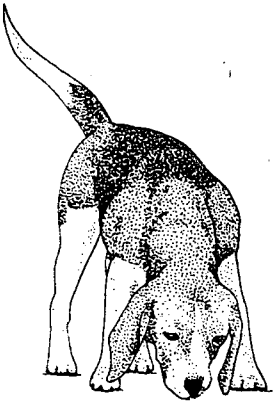
"A momentary carelessness is possible."

"Or that the weight of the little dog's paw could have depressed the trigger?"

"It might have happened, Fidelia. It very well might have. Who's to say?"

"Did you have much to do with long shots in your previous life?"

"I was not a bookie, if that's what you're wondering, but I did have many odd experiences . . . as do we all," said Greening and knelt again to his planting.



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The winner of the 1993 Robert L. Fish Award for best short story by a new writer, D. A. McGuire lives in Bridgewater, Massachusetts. In this, her fifth published story, she has chosen a setting that hearkens back to her childhood. "In 1962," she tells us, "I did enter a church in the manner described in this story," although the other elements of the piece, including its characters, are fictional. Ms. McGuire has a wonderful knack for creating a disturbing atmosphere: You won't soon forget her abandoned church . . .

THE BELL TOWER

by D. A. McGUIRE

My life is fairly routine now; some might even call it mundane. I'm forty-three years old, a teacher's aide, married to a bank manager, with three kids and long days filled with soccer practice, dance recitals, and story time at the library. It's a life that's predictable, ordinary, and safe. But there are days I wonder if I've paid too high a price for that safety and predictability. I wonder about that, especially if it's early spring and I'm driving to work and running a little early. That's when I'm most apt to take a slightly longer route, one that takes me through my old neighborhood and past the Unitarian church on Barrows Street. It's the same little church that's across the street from where my grandparents used to live; it's also the same church, with the bell tower in it, in which Julie Larkins, the minister's daughter, was killed fifty-three years ago.

My name is Julie Larkins, too, but I've been told that's just a coincidence. I'm Julie Larkins Smith now, but back when I was just Julie Larkins I did something I shouldn't have, and because I did, a lot of people's lives were changed.

It's strange to consider that, because if the people I work with—teachers, mostly—knew about it, they'd be horrified, and probably rightfully so. Still, when I think about what I and my best friend Polly Burns did when we were twelve years old, I also think

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how careful parents are with their children today, and by comparison, how lenient our parents were with us. It's different today. Thirty years ago people trusted the world to help them raise their children. Sadly, that isn't the case today.

When I was a child, the church on Barrows Street was still a church. Today it's been made over into apartments, and though I haven't set foot inside it since 1964, I wonder if it would be recognizable as a church. What did the contractor do with those wonderful, elegantly carved pews? And what happened to the altar, and the great, gold-edged Bible that rested up on the lecturn? That was the Bible Polly and I found covered with twenty-two years of dust. I remember we were startled to find its corners had been chewed, probably by mice, and that we wondered how the mice had climbed up the long, slim pedestal of the oak lecturn, and even, what God must think of little creatures who would attempt to devour His Holy Word?

So I wonder today, in 1995, what became of the beautiful, half-chewed Bible, and even the hymnals that Polly nearly tripped over up in the bell tower. What happened to all of it when the carpenters and electricians and plumbers came in to do their work? The building is now three apartments up, and two down, but how did they do that? How does one erase the *presence* of a church from a church?

And how, even more than that, does one erase the stain of blood, Julie Larkins's blood, from the floor of the bell tower?

It had been a Baptist church in the thirties, but of course that was long before my time. My grandparents, however, who lived in the big farmhouse across the street, often talked about those days, when they could hear the Baptist prayer meetings going on four or five nights a week. One day some members of the congregation crossed the street and invited my grandparents to join them. They refused, of course, but politely so. My family has never been much for church, but we respect any who have a need for it, for as my grandmother often said, "World'd be a funny place if we all went looking for the same thing, wouldn't it?"

Still, I don't think they were terribly displeased when the Baptists outgrew the little church and had to look for bigger accommodations elsewhere. As my grandfather put it (and he was only slightly less tolerant than my grandmother), "Never saw a danged group of people who need to go to church so often. Must be the biggest bunch of sinners God's ever seen."

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Anyhow, after the Baptists left, the Unitarians moved in. They brought with them an organ and installed a new bell in the tower. The Unitarians loved organ and choral music and for two years entertained my grandparents across the street. I recall my grandfather remarking, "We got the entertainment without the surcharge." Unfortunately, the Unitarians left too, in the spring of '42 . . . but under entirely different circumstances.

It was the Unitarian minister who married my parents, right in that little church. He got to know my grandparents, the parsonage being next to the church, and when it came time for my mother to be married, and as our family had no church, Pastor Larkins kindly offered to do the "dirty work," as my grandfather called it. The pastor even allowed my parents to have a little reception after, down in the common room in the church basement. They had to be married quickly; it was the spring of 1942 and my father was being drafted to fight in the war overseas. According to my grandparents there were a lot of "hurry-up" weddings that year.

But there were to be no more weddings in the Unitarian Church on Barrows Street after my parents'. They were the last, because two nights later Billy Richardson and Julie Larkins went up into the bell tower together, but only one of them came down alive.

Julie Larkins was the pastor's daughter, and no relation to my father, also a Larkins. Billy Richardson was her boyfriend, the son of a prominent local family, one in which the father, grandfather, and every son, uncle, and brother were lawyers. Two members of the family were judges; another served as a state senator for two terms. But none of that mattered much, because when Billy Richardson, youngest son of Emmanuel Richardson, Esq., went to trial for the murder of Julie Larkins, he was convicted on "overwhelming evidence," including the sworn testimony of Ed Corcoran, my grandfather, who was the one who found Billy in the bell tower that night with blood on his clothes and a gun in his hands, sobbing over the dead body of Julie Larkins.

After the trial was over, the Larkins family moved away. The congregation split up, its members joining other churches in town, and the church trustees sold the parsonage. Then they boarded up the little church, which is how it remained for over twenty years.

All through the rest of the forties, the fifties, and into the sixties, that's how it was and how I remember it, empty, with planks of rough wood nailed over the windows to keep trespassers out. Every now and then my family would hear rumors that the church was

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going to be sold, or rented out, or torn down, but it never happened. The little church just sat there, deserted and neglected, its paint peeling, its shingles slowly falling from the roof. Eventually the mice and squirrels found their way inside, made themselves at home. On rainy days we kids would stand under the overhang out on the small front stoop, and once when I was about eight, one of the two boards on a front bottom window fell off and we kids ran right over and huddled around it, trying to see inside. But my grandfather saw us and shooed us away. Later, at the supper table, I learned that he had taken it upon himself to get some nails and a clean sheet of plywood, then gone over and boarded the window back up.

That's how Ed Corcoran was. If something needed fixing, he'd just up and do it, no questions asked, no thanks required. He was always there for family, friends, just about anyone who needed him.

My own family lived just down the street from him, but I spent a lot of time at my grandparents' house. My father worked long hours in my grandfather's lumberyard and my mother was often sick. She was one of five girls and met my father when my grandfather brought him home one day, hoping one of his daughters would "take an interest." Strangely enough, it was the shyest and "most sensitive" of the Corcoran girls who did, though my grandmother often insisted it was simply, "Nature taking its own course."

Still, how I came to have the same name as the girl who'd died in the church across the street (and who did so just two days after my parents were married in that very same church, *and* whose father did the marriage service), well, it was, as my mother said, "pure coincidence." She simply liked the name Julie, so she named her only child, me, Julie.

But as I got older I suspected there had to be more to my name than "pure coincidence." The dead Julie Larkins had been my mother's age, eighteen, in 1942. She was Pastor Larkins's daughter; she lived in the parsonage next to the church. She was even invited to my parents' wedding and reception as my grandmother's photograph album proved. (I discovered this irrefutable fact myself. My grandmother kept meticulous records, down to listing the name of every face in every photograph she owned.) But when I confronted my grandmother with this discovery—I was eleven at the time and knew by then most of Julie Larkins's tragic history—she merely shrugged and said, "Well, it wouldn't have been neighborly not to invite the Larkins family, now would it?"

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But as I said, there was even more. There was the fact that every year around the time of my parents' anniversary, someone—a relative, friend, or neighbor—never failed to mention the following: "Nineteen (or twenty, or however many years it had been) years ago you got married, Anne, and two days later poor Julie Larkins was murdered over in the bell tower." Then this was always followed by somebody else, usually one of my aunts, snapping back with, "Oh, let's not talk about that! This is supposed to be a happy occasion! Let's forget all about that business, shall we?"

But even from these brief exchanges, and the look they'd generate: disquiet from my aunts and grandmother, anger from my father and grandfather, and from my mother (who was *never* the one to bring the subject up) a look of abject horror, I knew that Julie Larkins's death was the one thing my family could *never* forget.

I was daydreaming, standing at the paper copier, running off a set of tests for one of the teachers I worked with. I didn't see my friend come up behind me, not until she poked me lightly in the arm and said: "Daydreaming, Julie? You look a million miles away."

I smiled, turned to her. "Maybe I am. I'm stopping off at my mother's today."

I didn't have to explain. She was the only one I'd confided the whole story to; she knew about all the gaps still remaining, the gaps which continued to torment me fifty-three years after the first Julie Larkins's tragic death. She also knew about me and my friend Polly Burns and what we found the day we went into the church.

"Ask her, Julie. Go and ask her today. You know you've got to do it while you still can."

"I know." I sighed and took the test from the machine.

"You could be running out of time, and I mean that kindly," she went on.

I shuffled the papers together, looked at her, and said, "I know," again.

1964. I was twelve and, according to my grandmother, old enough to put the Julie Larkins–Billy Richardson story into its "proper perspective." But just what that "perspective" was supposed to be, I wasn't sure. My best friend, Polly Burns, certainly had her own "perspective," one she got from her gossipy, eighty-year-old grandmother, old Mrs. Burns, who lived with Polly's family. Polly couldn't talk about it in her house, however, because her mother would scold

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her and demand, "Is that old woman telling you tall tales again?"

Of course, I should also mention that Polly's mother could be just as bad. According to Polly, my family was a constant topic of conversation at her house—when I wasn't around, of course—and when I was, Mrs. Burns never failed to inquire about my mother's "... health? She hasn't had another of those bad headaches, has she? I noticed all the blinds were pulled on the far side of the house ... again."

But that's how it is when you live near a gossip, or a pair of gossips; you may gain a little information, but you have to give an awful lot back in return.

I usually gave the standard response, as I'd been instructed to when anyone pried into my family's "private concerns": "She's doing just fine, Mrs. Burns, but thank you for your concern."

At any rate, it was the older Mrs. Burns's version of the Julie Larkins–Billy Richardson story that Polly often regaled me with as we rode our bikes side by side up and down the back roads of our neighborhood. According to Polly's "Gram," Billy Richardson was a "scorned lover," who took Julie up into the bell tower and shot her dead because she wouldn't run off and marry him. Then Billy lied about what had happened, claiming it was a botched suicide pact, that they'd both been planning to kill themselves because his family didn't approve of Julie and had forbidden him to marry her. According to Billy, he got scared at the last minute and chickened out. He argued with Julie and tried to stop her, but as he was trying to take the gun away from her, it went off, shooting her in the chest.

But there was even more to the story than that:

"Billy came from a real rich family, the Southerdale Richardsons, and little Julie Larkins wasn't good enough for them." Polly was chewing gum as she talked and taking first one hand, then both hands off the handlebars as she rode her bike. "They didn't like Billy seeing Julie. They didn't like him going to her church. They were Presber ... Presber-something-or-others, and—"

"Presbyterians."

"Yeah, and anyhow, he joined her church and sang in the choir and was in the youth group and everything. Gram says Billy was desperately in love with Julie and wanted to marry her, but his parents forbid it." And then Polly tilted her head back and shook it rather dramatically. Her Gram was a big fan of true-love confessional magazines. "So, because they couldn't be together in life,

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they decided they'd be together in death and that way no one could separate them . . . ever."

"Do you believe that?" I'd heard all this before.

"No. That was his defense." Polly sort of sneered, just like her mother would. Polly's mother was the type who enjoyed believing the worst of everyone. "He just wanted everyone to think that so he could get away with killing her. He was heard telling his best friend the night before he killed Julie that if he couldn't have her, he didn't want anyone else having her either. So he did it; Billy Richardson made up that suicide story so he could get away with it."

Suddenly Polly veered over to the side of the road and started doing figure-8's in the dirt. That wasn't good; Polly Burns had an attention span of about twenty seconds. Today she'd be classified as having attention-deficit disorder; back then she was just "overactive." So, as she started to hum one of the Beatles' new songs and attempted to lift both feet off the pedals—along with both hands—I quickly jumped in with:

"If they planned to kill themselves—" I turned my bike slightly in front of hers "—then why didn't they both leave suicide notes?"

We'd had this conversation six or seven times before, something I now know kids do when they're troubled by something. Anyhow, I knew Polly's answer before I even asked the question.

"According to Gram he *did* leave a note, put it right on his father's desk where he'd see it in the morning. But the police and the District . . . something or other, said it was just a setup, that Billy wanted it to look like suicide. Billy said he chickened out, and couldn't go through with it, but the police say Billy planned the whole thing from the beginning." She started to blow an enormous bubble which I reached out to demolish with the flat of my hand.

"Hey!" she squealed.

"Finish it."

"Finish it? Oh, okay." She started to wind the deflated bubble around her index finger. "But they never found her note, because there never was a note. Billy Richardson killed Julie Larkins. He lied about all that suicide stuff. He lied about the note. It was all a lie." She made an exaggerated, silly face at me. "A big, fat, juicy lie."

We were at the top of Rocky Hill Road, the small road that ran in a long, slow incline down to Barrow Street, and the church, and my grandparents' house. From here we could just see the front corner of the church, the corner with the bell tower. I stopped, straddled

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my bike, and thought for a minute. I could hear Polly at my side, starting on a new piece of gum.

"Gram says everyone looked for a note, the police I mean, and Julie's family. The Richardsons said if the Larkins family found a note, they probably destroyed it so Billy'd go to jail, but Gram said that wasn't so, that the Larkins asked for something; they asked for . . . for . . . "

"Leniency," I said, almost automatically.

"Yeah, leniency, because they weren't vin . . . vin . . . "

"Vindictive." I looked at her, thinking that every time I heard this story I was trying to look at it in a different way. But every time it came out the same way, and it struck me not so much as being romantic or even tragic, as it was sad . . . simply sad. There were the Larkinses, wanting so much to believe Billy's story, that it had been a double-suicide gone wrong. When the two were found—Billy rang the bell in the tower after Julie was shot—it was my grandfather who ran across the street and found them, Billy bent over Julie's body, bawling his eyes out, trying to pick her up. Both of them were covered with blood.

But these were details I knew from listening in to conversations at my own house, conversations between my grandfather and mother, for the most part. In fact, they weren't conversations so much as they were arguments. It always seemed my grandfather was trying to convince my mother of something, but of what I could never fully grasp. But I do know this, that though I couldn't follow their argument, or perhaps never heard enough of it to put it all together, I was able to understand the feelings between them as they argued. She was upset—he was frustrated.

"I'm sorry, Julie. I'm sorry, Julie." Polly was laughing in a sing-song voice, but when she saw my serious expression, she frowned. "Hey, that's what Billy was saying when they took him off to jail. 'I'm sorry, Julie.' "

"I want to know what really happened," I told her determinedly, trying to ignore the beguiling but deceptively innocent look on her little pixie face. "I want to know what really happened up in that bell tower."

"Some boys broke into the church right after they closed it up." She came up close to me on her bike. "They saw the bloodstain on the floor."

"That's just a made-up story," I snapped back. "There is no bloodstain."

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"There isn't?" Polly laughed. "But don't you wish we could get inside and see for ourselves?"

"No." I tried to sound firm, authoritative, like an adult. But we'd talked about this before, too, and as she spun away from me, raking her bike in a circle as she did, she laughed and sang out:

"Ding dong, ding dong, Julie Larkins's dead. Ding dong, ding dong, Billy's shot her through the head!" Then off down Rocky Hill Road she raced.

"But that's wrong," I muttered as I followed fast behind on my bike, the wind in my hair, my heart beating fast with indignation. "He shot her . . . or she shot herself . . . in the chest. In the chest!"

Behind the church was a grove of small trees which grew right up to the foundation; they'd taken over the dirt parking lot which had once been there. Beyond the trees was swampland, and paths that led down to an abandoned sandpit. Not many people came this way, just the occasional person walking a dog, or maybe riding a horse through the old, worn trails that cut through the swamp. Today they're building condominiums out behind the church, but in 1964 there was just the woods, the swamp, and, next-door, the parsonage, which was occupied by Old Man Winchester, a widower whose children were grown up and gone. On the other side of the church was a field in which another neighbor kept a few cows. But the point was this—if someone wanted to sneak around behind the church, it was easy enough to do. Old Man Winchester kept to himself and was seldom seen. And though my grandparents lived across the street, during the day they both worked at the lumberyard. My grandmother worked as bookkeeper and secretary, and my grandfather was owner and general overseer.

So there we were, Polly and me on our bikes, behind the church, and even if anyone had seen us ride over here, they'd have thought nothing of it. Everyone knew the local kids played out here, rode their bikes down to the sandpit. It was an entirely different time back then, and an entirely different world.

At any rate, there we were, where we'd been a dozen times before, staring up at the back of the building, wondering what secrets, if any, it still contained. The church had been built on a slight hill that rose up toward the street, so that the back of the building was higher, and what we were looking at was actually the back wall of the basement, a foundation made of mortared fieldstone. The first floor was ten feet above us, and accessible by the front doors over-

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looking Barrows Street, a side entrance facing the Winchester house, and this door, one made of whitewashed wood with a huge padlock on it.

We often wondered about this third door. It stuck out apart from the foundation of the church, attached to a small annex, rather like a little shed which had been tacked onto the church as an afterthought.

"Trash shed," Polly told me as she threw her bike down on the ground. She walked over to the door, rummaged in a pile of leaves for a moment, then pulled out something long, smooth, and metal from under them. A crowbar. "Here, take a look." And with that she stuck the end of the bar into a crack between the door and the doorframe and pulled it open about an inch and a half. Evidently the wood was soft and pliable, and as she pushed, using the crowbar as a lever, she was able to pry the bottom of the door open just enough to look inside.

"How did you—"

"Shut up and take a look, would you?" she snapped impatiently.

So I did, dropping my bike into the leaves next to hers. On my hands and knees I peeked in through the slowly enlarging crack she was making.

"I saw some boys poking around here a few days ago. I guess they dropped this. They must have been trying to get in."

"You're right," I told her. "It's full of trash." Through the crack I could see what looked like two large, galvanized trash barrels, some old pieces of wood, and a ladder leaning against one wall. Then I looked up to the padlock Polly was straining against. It was making a creaking sound as she continued to exert pressure on it. I could see that the metal piece the lock slipped into was starting to give, that the wood on the doorframe it had been bolted to was starting to splinter.

She let go and took a breath, wiped her forehead. I was still on my knees when she whispered to me, "We could do it, you know. If both of us pushed, it would come right off."

"No." I looked up at her, aware of the strange expression on her face.

"If we don't, those boys will. They'll come back, Julie, probably at night. We could go in and just take a look around. We won't touch a thing! We can go look in the bell tower and see if—"

I stood up, faced her, determined to stand my ground. "No. It's trespassing, and if we"—I put my hand on the padlock—"break this,

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it's not just trespassing, it's breaking and entering . . . I think."

"So afterwards we go tell your grandfather we found the door swinging open. He'll never suspect it was us! Come on, Julie. Just this once?"

"Maybe it doesn't even lead into the church. Maybe it's just an old shed stuck onto the church to hold trash in. Maybe . . . " I bit my lip.

"Let's at least look? Come on, Julie." Her voice started to change into a whine. "You going to let a couple of boys do it instead of us? Because they're coming back." Then she lied; I knew it was a lie, but suddenly I didn't care. "I know they're coming back. I heard them say so."

I don't know why I gave in. But I did. The temptation was simply too great. So I put my weight and twelve-year-old strength behind the crowbar with Polly and together we split the wood holding the metal piece on the doorframe. We heard it snap, then pop off, and the door swung wide.

For a moment we were disappointed, and I imagined going to my grandfather to tell him we'd found the back door wide open. It looked just like an old trash shed; inside were a couple of empty barrels standing on end, a ladder, some wooden planks, and a pile of old newspapers, wet and brown, sitting right on the bare ground. Then Polly walked in, looked up, and started to laugh. I stepped in with her and she took my hand and pointed up, her laughter changing into uncontrollable giggles.

We were looking up at the underside of a toilet bowl—or toilet seat rather—which was straight overhead and looked like it was set right in the ceiling . . . or floor above. Maybe this little annex was used for storing old barrels and trash now, but twenty-two years ago it had been an outhouse . . . an outhouse attached to the back of a church.

"Can you imagine?" she cried. "Can you imagine *sitting* up there?"

"Better," I said to her with fresh determination. "Can you imagine crawling through that hole to get inside? That's the bathroom up there, dummy. We can get through there and into the church!"

"No." A look of horror erased the laughter from her face. "You can't mean that we're going to—"

"Yes. Find some way to wedge the door shut, and cover our bikes with leaves." I was already making my way up onto the barrels; the toilet seat was a good nine feet up from the earthen floor below it. But suddenly there was not one shred of doubt or concern in my

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mind: Polly and I were going into the church . . . and this was the way we were going in.

"Do you believe in destiny? Do you believe some things were meant to be?" That was my friend at work talking to me, waking me from the trance I'd drifted into again. She had a pile of papers she was correcting under her elbows; I had one, too, and had been methodically grading them without any conscious awareness of doing so.

"If so, Julie," she went on, "maybe you were *meant* to go into the church that day. And now there's only one thing left for you to do: ask her. Ask her *today*."

But I was still noncommittal, and woken now from my daydream, started in on the papers afresh; I'd have to go back and double-check the ones I'd already done to make certain I'd made no errors.

I didn't want to admit to her, or to anyone else, that she was probably right.

Polly and I were both skinny little kids, even at twelve, and we wriggled through the toilet seat one after another easily enough, the only problem being my head. I had to twist and turn it until I could shove it through. But the important thing was that we were in. We were finally inside the church where Julie Larkins was killed!

And at first we didn't touch a thing. Everything was dirty and dusty and it was dark; streaks of light fell across the floor through the chinks in between the boards over the windows. But then, as our eyes adjusted, we started to explore. We found the church kitchen off the common room. There were pots and pans still hanging on the walls, a wood stove in one corner with a can of matches on top, and in the cabinets cans of soup and vegetables . . . including a can of pears which had split in half long ago, leaving a dark stain on the cabinet shelf.

We didn't stay downstairs for long, though; once we found the stairs we crept like a couple of rats or sneak-thieves up to the main floor, went through the cloakroom, and out into the main hall. A sprinkling of light streamed in from overhead through a series of high, black-bordered stained-glass windows that I'd never noticed from outside. But even here it was the same: dirty, dusty, and yet strangely compelling. Slowly we walked down the center aisle between the rows of pews in silence; I felt Polly touch my hand. When I looked where she was pointing I saw that the leather-covered seats had been chewed to bits. By mice? Rats?

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I shook my head as she started to speak, and pointed ahead to the altar. She followed me, right up onto the pulpit, to the lectern upon which the great, gold-edged Bible still rested.

"I don't believe this," I told her softly. "It's like a TV show, but better. Everything is just . . . stuck in time."

She was brushing off the cover of the Bible; we could see that its two bottom corners had been chewed. Mice again.

"This is weird," she agreed. "Should we try to find . . . the bell tower?"

"Look for stairs," I told her.

We found them at the opposite end of the cloakroom, behind a door that looked as if it belonged to an ordinary closet, but which opened instead to a tightly wound set of spiral stairs that led up into the closed, cool, and dusty bell tower. At every step my legs trembled, my heart beat harder. I began to wonder what would happen to us if we were caught.

"There it is," Polly said, moving from behind me and across the floor of the tower. Above us hung the bell, not looking nearly as big as I'd always imagined. There were several ropes holding it up, and some wires supporting it to the sides. When I stood directly beneath it and looked straight up I could see something stuck up inside, tucked around the clapper. Someone had put cloth or papers around it so it wouldn't ring.

"And there *it* is!" she exclaimed, turning my attention from the bell. "There! Julie, look!" She had both hands over her mouth as though she was holding in a scream. For there, under the litter of what looked like old newspapers, was a dark brown stain upon the hardwood floor.

"Blood," she whispered. "The bloodstain." Then she looked at me. "Oh, Julie, do you realize where we are? This is where *he* killed her!"

I stooped over, picked up one of the newspapers from the floor. It was yellowed and brittle, the date September 6, 1942, probably about the time they closed up the church for good.

"It's too weird. I'm not feeling very good," Polly said. She started to move back, her eyes fixed on the dark stain on the floor. She couldn't see that she was walking backwards into a pile of books on the floor. She made a little shriek, covering her mouth as she did, and nearly fell over them. I grabbed her arm angrily, shaking her.

"Stop making all that noise! Are you forgetting where we are?" Then my eyes dropped to the books she'd nearly stumbled over.

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Bibles? No, stacks of hymnals with green leather bindings, and the words "Barrows Street Unitarian Church" printed on them. And beneath them . . .

I bent over, lifted one up, and a rain of straw, shredded papers, and mice hair—the detritus of a mouse's nest—fell onto the floor.

"Oh, how disgusting!" Polly cried. "I want to get out of here!"

"The mice have been making nests up here," I told her, shaking the book. It was largely intact, just a few edges chewed. I ran my fingers over the cover, wiping the dust from the name, "Johnston," printed in the lower right-hand corner.

"This place is sickening. You could get some kind of disease touching that thing," Polly whined.

I dropped the book, then with my foot started to kick aside the other books. A cloud of filthy dust rose up into the air. Polly was already past me, muttering, complaining.

I kicked the pile again, seeing other names appear on many of the half-chewed hymnals. Morris. Green. Jacobson. And then, Larkins. I kicked away straw, dust, and the tattered remains of a half-dozen hymnals, then leaned over and picked it up. Holding it by its binding, I shook it. Nothing. Then I saw another with the same name. I picked that one up, shook it, too. Again, nothing. And then a third with the name Larkins on it, its corners gone, its binding falling apart in my hand as I picked it up. But when I shook this one, something dropped out onto the floor, something white, something which the mice had found before me and chewed on. I reached over and picked it up, shaking it as I did.

It wasn't what I expected at all. It was a flat, square envelope, containing something fairly stiff. In one corner of the envelope was something clearly identifiable as a bell, but not necessarily a church bell—no, this was a special kind of church bell, a wedding bell, for this was a wedding card and it was addressed to: Anne Larkins, 129 Barrows Street, Southerdale, Mass.

Polly would be upset with me, that I knew, but it didn't matter because I knew I had to show this to somebody. . . .

And I knew that somebody was my grandfather.

"I drove by the old church today."

"Did you?" She was standing by the kitchen counter, taking down mugs for coffee, plates for cookies. I often stopped by on my way home from work; today we'd been planning to talk about her garden, what flats she wanted me to pick up for her. Still, just the mention

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of the church made her uneasy. I saw her hand tremble as she poured my coffee.

My mother was seventy-one years old, and despite giving an outward appearance of youth and vigor, she had high blood pressure and problems with her weight and cholesterol. I knew that I could lose her at any time; I also knew my friend from work was right: I had to ask her and I had to do it now.

Because she was the only one who knew all of it. Dad was gone now fifteen years, both my grandparents, too. And after she passed away, there'd be no way to learn the whole truth.

"I'm going to get the flats on my way home," I told her, trying to ease into things gently. "He's always so glad to see me, Mom, always gives me such a big smile. I think he'd give me everything for free if I just asked."

"Well, it would be the least he could do, wouldn't it?" she said.

That surprised me. "Mom?"

"After all, Julie, you did save his life, didn't you?" She was busy putting cookies out, getting down the sugar bowl and cream pitcher. "What I mean to say is that you gave him back his life. Twenty-two years that man spent in prison for something he didn't do, and he'd be there still if you hadn't found that letter."

"Julie's letter," I said. "Julie's suicide letter. Tucked in her mother's hymnal for her to find on the following Sunday . . . except there were no services that following Sunday."

"Of course. Now can we talk about something more pleasant?" she said, smiling at me as she opened the refrigerator.

"You sound just like Grandma used to sound, whenever anyone brought up Julie's death."

"Do I?" She sat down opposite me, put some cream in her coffee, stirred it.

"Momma, what *was* in Julie's suicide letter? No one really ever told me, and the newspapers never said—"

"Oh, her exact words weren't important," she answered. "What was important, Julie dear, was that the letter supported what Billy Richardson always claimed, that he and Julie had planned to commit suicide together. Now you already know all this—do we need to talk about it anymore?"

But I had caught something she had said, something I could hook onto, almost as though I knew it had to come.

"You're wrong, Momma."

"Julie?"

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"Her exact words *were* important. Look, maybe you couldn't tell me everything when I was only twelve, but you can tell me now. Please tell me what was in that letter?"

"Oh, Julie, I don't remember the exact words."

I thought back to that day, that crumbling stack of church hymnals, the horrified look on Polly's face as she and I realized the mice had been chewing on them and building nests among them for over twenty years.

"And it wasn't just a letter I found. There was a wedding *card* in that envelope. It had your name on it, and in one of the corners was a wedding bell."

She was suddenly quiet and looked down at her untouched coffee.

"I gave the envelope to Grandpa and I never saw it again. He gave it to the police, the letter which was *inside* the card, didn't he? There were two things in that envelope."

Still no response from her.

"Mom, when was the last time you had a bad headache?"

She lifted just her eyes to me. Perhaps she knew, too, it was time to tell me the whole truth.

"Was it in 1964?" I went on. "You had a headache that day, the day Polly and I went into the church, because Mrs. Burns asked me about it. She'd seen the curtains drawn in your bedroom. Mom? That card was addressed *to you,* and I remember asking Grandpa about that later but he said Julie just forgot to give you a wedding card and that it wasn't important. He said the only important thing was the letter."

I could see her hand was shaking as she wrapped it around her coffee mug.

"So you're wrong, Momma, when you say the exact words don't matter, because I think they do. Julie wrote a suicide note, yes, but she put it in her wedding card—to you! Now I remember from the papers that *the letter* was addressed to her mother, and it was that letter that freed Billy Richardson from prison, but, Mom, Julie must have written something to you, too; yes? Didn't she? Didn't she write something to you on that wedding card?"

"She said it wasn't my fault. Oh dear God, that it hadn't been my fault at all!" Her head fell forward, into her hands. "And it is true, Julie, that the words don't matter. It's only *what* the words convey that ever matters."

"You said something to her . . . "

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"Oh, yes, dear God, I did, but I never meant it!" She lifted her head, stared at me through red-rimmed eyes. "She wrote that she was happy for me, but that I was never to blame myself. . . ."

"Blame? For what?" But then I knew, and suddenly I was trembling, too.

"For what happened in the bell tower."

"And why . . . why would you ever think you were to blame?"

But I think I knew that, too, as pieces fell into place. The bad headaches. The long spells of depression. The way my family alternately wanted to remember—then forget—Julie Larkins. For all of that had come to an end on the day I found the wedding card with my mother's name on it and gave it to my grandfather. I had saved more than Billy Richardson's life when I trespassed where I didn't belong. I had saved my mother's life, as well.

"Tell me," I begged. "Because you did give me her name, didn't you?"

"Julie?" She was still shaking and I gave her my hand. "Oh yes, I gave you her name, for the Julie whose death I thought I caused. Larkins, your father's name, was the only coincidence." I felt her fingers grind into mine, and I listened.

"We had a little rehearsal party the night before the wedding and my parents invited the Larkinses over for cake and ice cream, nothing fancy." Her fingers bore down harder on mine. "But oh, Julie, I was so excited! Today we'd say that I was on an emotional roller coaster. I was marrying your father, the man I loved, but in six days he was going off to war. *To war.* And in those days we knew a lot of young men weren't going to be coming home. So you see, I was happy, and scared to death at the same time. I was forcing myself to laugh and smile and be gay for him, but underneath it all I was so scared, so terribly scared. And maybe that's why . . . why I said what I did to Julie."

There was a pause in which she took a deep breath; her grip on my fingers loosened.

"Julie asked me what I would do if I couldn't marry Matt Larkins, what I would do if his family forbid him to marry me." She looked at me desperately. "Julie honey, I was going up and down so fast, I don't know why I said what I did. But I told her that if I couldn't marry Matt Larkins, then I'd find a gun and shoot myself! I didn't really mean it like that, but that's what I told her. I told her if I couldn't live with the man I loved, then I'd rather die!"

I just stared at her, willing myself to silence as she went on.

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"And Julie said nothing, she just smiled and nodded and then my sisters were there, dragging me away. I forgot all about it, until I heard . . . we were on our honeymoon when your grandmother called . . . she told us that Julie was . . . "

I reached out and took my mother's other hand.

"I came home; we cut our honeymoon short and we came right home and I told my parents what Julie had asked me, and what I said to her, but my father said it didn't matter what I said to her, that *she* never said anything about suicide to me. They were my words, not hers, and the evidence was just overwhelming against Billy. Besides, there was no note, even though Billy insisted there had to be one, no one believed him . . . " Her voice died off and she looked away.

"I understand."

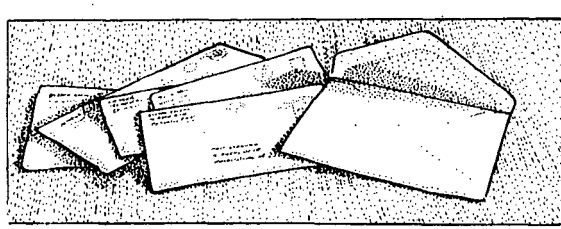
"How can you understand when I barely do myself? After she died I would put her out of my mind for weeks, or months, and then someone would say something . . . innocently, about her or Billy and then I'd just fall apart. I felt so sure I was to blame, and it was driving me crazy, Julie honey, all those years. But it always came back to this: If what Billy said was true, then there'd have to be a note, a suicide letter. Sometimes I even think that maybe *you* were meant to find that letter."

"It didn't really end, even after I found the letter, not all of it."

"Most of the pain did," she said softly, more calmly, "because finally Billy could be set free, and that made the biggest difference of all. Still, I'll live the rest of my life wondering if perhaps I'd said something different to her that night . . . "

She stopped and tipped her head forward and I went to her and gave her a hug.

And later that day I gave him a hug, too, Billy Richardson, when I went to pick up my flats at Richardson's Nursery and Greenhouse.



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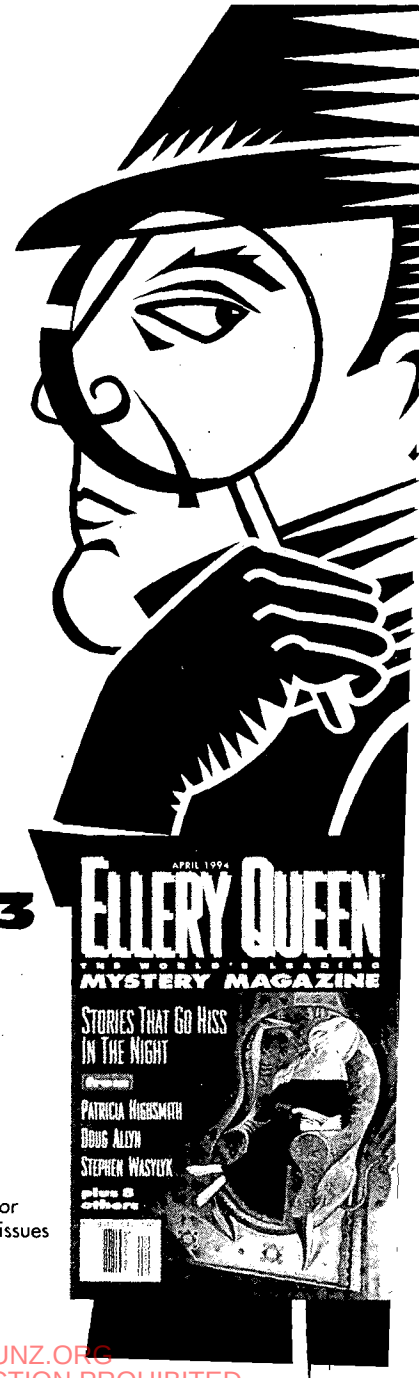

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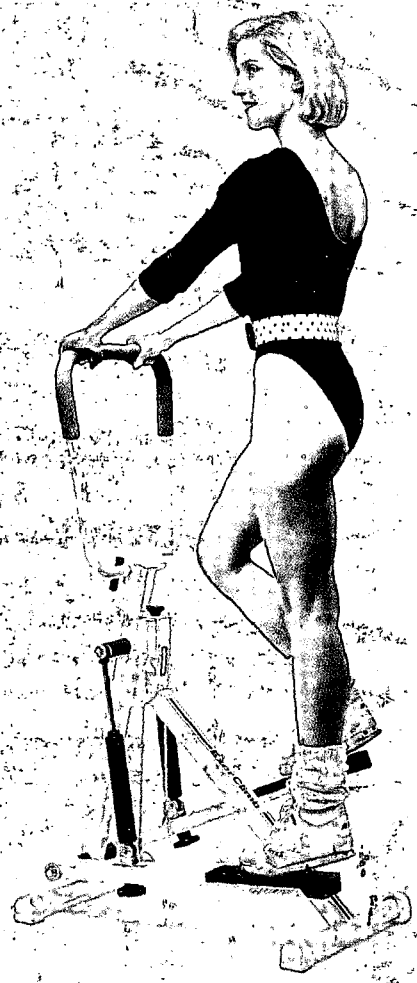

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